

**The Things We Found in the Ashes of Our World**  
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# The Things We Found in the Ashes of Our World

by [shefrommo](#)

## Summary

Ironically enough, Kakashi didn't start having treasonous thoughts until *after* he'd already committed treason.

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Or, during a mission gone wrong, Kakashi discovers Obito's alive. He never comes back from that mission.

Five years later, Team Seven stumbles across a pair of Akatsuki members--both of whom are working under false identities, both of whom were declared dead years ago.

## Notes

Hello! This is my take on the Akatsuki!Kakashi AU. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Let me give out a quick warning to begin with though--at one point, Obito's POV briefly mentions a pedophile. There's nothing explicit mentioned, but if that's going to bother you, then when you reach the line "Luckily, when Obito went snooping...", go ahead and skip down to "Obito could see the way the dominoes would fall already."

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

# Tsutsuji Village Arc: 1

Ironically enough, Kakashi didn't start having treasonous thoughts until *after* he'd already committed treason.

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*Sandaime-sama*, Kakashi thought uncharitably, *truly had a gift for making his shinobi's perfectly reasonable concerns sound infantile. A gift, and a talent for making those same shinobi feel like overgrown toddlers throwing tantrums over absolutely nothing.*

He packed his ANBU gear, careful to keep his motions smooth rather than stiff with frustration.

Sage only *knew* who was watching Loose Cannon Kakashi. He hadn't won himself any favors when he'd retrieved Tenzo against orders, and while ANBU headquarters was usually a place he could relax a little and show a smidge more emotion, he didn't dare do so now. Not so soon after his meeting with Sandaime-sama, anyway.

A gentle tap at the doorframe made him turn around, already pasting a smile on for his visitor.

Tenzo watched him worriedly from the entrance to the room. "Kakashi-senpai," he asked quietly, "you've got another mission? Already? You just got back today."

Kakashi shrugged. "My last mission wasn't too bad," he lied, "so Hokage-sama asked me to do this one. Shouldn't take more than five or six days to complete, and most of that will just be travel time. I'll turn in a little early tonight to make up for lost sleep, and I'll be good to go."

He stooped down, dragging his disguise kit out from under his bed. He'd probably have to restock it soon, given the way things had been going.

Several of his more recent missions had gone...suspiciously wrong. There was always the chance that a mission could go wrong, of course, but when the last seven missions Kakashi had taken had gone awry right from the start, it didn't seem like coincidence.

Once was happenstance, twice was coincidence, but thrice was enemy

action and Kakashi sincerely doubted that it *wasn't* enemy action, considering the trouble had started right after he'd stolen Tenzo away from Danzo.

Kakashi had brought up the issues he'd been encountering to Sandaime-sama, since they amounted to mission sabotage—there was no other explanation for the sheer amount of incorrect mission intel—but Sandaime-sama had dismissed his concerns.

“Unexpected resistance is par for the course on S-Ranked ANBU missions,” his *ass*.

Kakashi had been banned from S-Ranked missions as part of his punishment for disobeying Sandaime-sama, and the Hokage knew damn well that none of Kakashi's missions, even with the difficulty escalation from the sabotage, had been classed as S-Rank.

Kakashi bit back a scowl as he rummaged through his disguise kit. He'd taken to bringing it with him, simply because he couldn't trust any of the intel he received at assignment, and only a fool would reuse a disguise when he *knew* Danzo was watching his performance. If only just to find new and inventive ways to fuck up Kakashi's mission.

“Here,” Tenzo said softly, and Kakashi turned around to see him holding a sealing scroll out. “You've been going through disguises like a cornfield goes through a compost heap. I took the liberty of buying you more disguise supplies.” A sardonic smile. “It's not like I've got anything else I can do when it's not my turn on guard rotation.”

Kakashi blinked, then took it from him. “Thanks,” he said.

Tenzo shrugged a little. “It's no problem. It's the least I can do, after all the trouble you went through to get me.”

He stopped there, but they both knew what he would have said next.

*Sorry for the trouble you're still going through.*

Kakashi had disobeyed a direct order from the Hokage when he'd retrieved Tenzo. Technically, he could be charged with treason for doing so—except he'd *succeeded* in retrieving Tenzo, and there was no way that Sandaime-sama was going to let a Mokuton user go now that he had access. No, he'd keep Tenzo very close, as part of his ANBU guard.

But retrieving a valuable asset (a *comrade*) didn't negate the fact that

Kakashi had committed a crime. All it meant was that he wasn't going to be executed for treason.

To make matters worse, Tenzo had been part of a subversive, treasonous group and could also be charged with treason. Though officially he was on "probation," since Sandaime-sama wasn't going to punish someone who "carried the much-vaunted Mokuton," Kakashi and Tenzo both knew that Tenzo was on thin ice.

Or rather, Kakashi was, because he was the one who was paying the price for the both of them.

Kakashi's punishment was two-fold. He was no longer trusted to run S-Ranked missions, so he was banned from them, but he was also going to complete some truly vile missions.

These were bad even by *ANBU* standards, and everyone knew that *ANBU* standards were so low, they were practically in bed with the earthworms.

If Kakashi could complete a number of such missions without causing problems, then he would regain Sandaime-sama's trust, and Tenzo would officially move off probation and out of the Hokage's personal guard.

Then Kakashi could add Tenzo to his personal *ANBU* team—the other members of which had already worked with Tenzo before during the various new recruit tests. Once Tenzo was under Kakashi's formal command, he would be assured that Danzo couldn't sneak Tenzo away while nobody (who cared) was looking.

But only the Hokage himself knew how many missions it would take to get to that point. And Sage only knew if Kakashi would survive the sabotaged missions long enough to get back into Sandaime-sama's good graces.

Danzo, of course, received no such sanctions for running a subversive, treasonous group. Evidently he'd gotten a slap on the wrist and no further supervision, even after he tried to order Kakashi to assassinate Sandaime-sama and Kakashi *reported* the assassination attempt *to the Hokage himself*.

Or, Kakashi reflected grimly, perhaps Danzo was being supervised better now, but the watchers didn't notice what he was doing to Kakashi's missions. Or they *did* notice, but nobody who received their report cared.

It didn't say anything good about Sandaime-sama's ability to rein in his teammate that all three options were equally likely.

Shaking the grim thoughts off, Kakashi tucked Tenzo's gifted scroll into his kit and shouldered the whole thing. "Maa, I'll be fine," Kakashi said breezily, and brushed past his kouhai. "I'm sure my ninken will enjoy the camping trip. We can make campfire-fried squirrel for dinner. We haven't had that in ages."

*Not since before Obito died*, Kakashi added in the privacy of his mind. Rin had always hated campfire-fried squirrel, though she would never say as much, and Obito would get snippy on her behalf if Kakashi tried to make it for them.

The first time Kakashi had suggested squirrels for dinner after Obito's death, he and Rin had paused, waiting for the inevitable outburst. They had only remembered *after* the silence dragged on too long that there would be no rejoinder.

They hadn't had squirrel that night.

On second thought, maybe Kakashi wouldn't make campfire-fried squirrel after all. Ration bars would do just fine. If they were Akimichi approved, they were mission ready, wasn't that how it worked? At least that was how it worked for food pills, and Kakashi didn't see why that wouldn't work for ration bars too.

"Campfire-fried squirrel?" A new voice asked, sounding far too cheerful to fit in with the quiet ANBU headquarters.

Kakashi turned to see Shisui leaning against the wall, Itachi hovering at his shoulder. Itachi looked concerned. Shisui had a bright smile on his face that did not reflect in his eyes.

"I've never had that one before," Shisui said. "Captain, have you been holding out on us?"

Kakashi smiled at him. "Yes," he lied shamelessly. "I assumed you didn't want to eat squirrel that had been charred black, so I never made it for you, but if you *really* want to eat charcoal so bad, I'd be happy to oblige."

Shisui made a show out of blanching and holding his hands up nervously. "Oh~ never mind then. You can keep your charcoal to yourself. I've had more than enough at home."

Tenzo huffed as he followed Kakashi out of the ANBU captain's room. "Does that mean you've burned everything you've cooked?" He asked sarcastically. "Why am I not surprised?"

"Hey," Shisui spluttered, "I am a wonderful cook, thank you very much."

Tenzo, who had had to run his wilderness survival skills test with Shisui and Itachi and had therefore suffered through Shisui's idea of campfire cooking, gave him a deeply distrustful look.

"It's true!" Shisui insisted. "I'm a perfectly good cook. Itachi, you've eaten my food before, you tell him!" He turned beseeching eyes on his boyfriend.

Itachi sighed. "He is a perfectly good cook," he parroted, then added, "so long as he has an actual kitchen to use. His campfire cooking leaves quite a bit to be desired."

Shisui gasped and clutched at his heart in mock-betrayal. "Well!" he declared, "I've never! *Never*, I tell you, *never* been so betrayed in my life."

He threw an arm across Itachi's shoulders, and leaned towards Kakashi in a conspiratorial manner. "Now, I wasn't planning on revealing the true source of my charcoal woes, but since *somebody*," he shook Itachi's shoulders, "so cruelly betrayed me, I'm going to. You see, my bratty baby brother-in-law recently decided to practice his Great Fireball and make himself some sun-dried tomatoes all in one go, and turned his little slices of squishy red fruit into solid charcoal instead."

Itachi frowned and drove his elbow into Shisui's side, hard. "Sasuke is not a brat," he lectured. "And you didn't have to eat the tomatoes if you didn't want to."

At the same time, Tenzo said, "Tomatoes aren't fruit, Shisui."

"Yes, they are, Tenzo. Tomato juice exists; if you can juice something, it's a fruit." Shisui said distractedly, and turned to Itachi. "What do you *mean* I didn't have to, Ita-chan?"

He gave his boyfriend a bewildered look. "Of course I had to. Sasuke was insisting that we eat the charcoal so his precious tomatoes wouldn't go to waste and he looked like he was going to *cry*. I knew from the moment his lip started wobbling that you were going to offer

to eat all the charcoal for him so he wouldn't have to suffer through it, and there was no way I was going to make *you* eat all that by yourself."

Shisui grimaced and ran a hand through his hair. "Although I'm still pretty sure that gave me food poisoning."

Itachi didn't answer, but he looked up at Shisui with such surprised affection that Kakashi and Tenzo immediately felt like they were intruding on something.

So, of course, Kakashi had to go and ruin their mood. "Maa, Shisui," he said pleasantly, "I'm sure that if you try hard enough, you could also juice a human being. Does that make us fruits?"

Shisui squawked in horror, and turned to gape at Kakashi. "What?! No! Captain why would you even say that?!"

"Hmm, I wonder," Kakashi said whimsically, just to rile his subordinates up further.

While both Shisui and Tenzo puffed up in offense, clearly about to launch into a lecture on why humans weren't fruit (Shisui) and why juicing things wasn't indicative of being fruit (Tenzo), Itachi turned to Kakashi.

"Captain," Itachi said, "you have already been assigned a new mission?"

Kakashi sobered up. "Yeah," he said.

Itachi's brow furrowed. "Your allotted down time between missions is not finished," he pointed out, and left it unsaid that Kakashi hadn't even had the chance to start it.

Kakashi inclined his head. "It isn't," he acknowledged, "but I guess that means I'll have a lot saved up for after this mission."

Itachi opened his mouth again, then hesitated and closed it. Shisui asked his question for him. "And I suppose that teammates aren't allowed?"

"This is a solo op, yes," Kakashi said.

"Hmm," Shisui said, and tucked his arm back around Itachi's shoulders. He rocked a little on his heels. "Well, if you need anything,



send us a summon. We'll keep our eyes peeled for a snarky pug." He winked, then added, quieter, "Do you want to keep an eye for a crow?"

Kakashi gave the two crow-summoners a sharp look. "No," he said, "you'll just be inviting more trouble down on your heads. Stay here and don't interfere."

Shisui and Itachi exchanged grim looks.

"That's an order, Crow, Raven." Hound said, tone demanding acknowledgement.

All three of his squad mates straightened up and saluted. "Yes, Captain," they chorused.

Hound looked them over critically, then nodded once. Kakashi shifted his grasp on his kit, then said, calmer. "I'll be off then. I'll see you in about a week, if all goes well."

And then, because a good Captain, much like a good sensei, reassures the inexperienced kids under their command, Kakashi added, "Which it will."

"Yes, Captain," they repeated, but their voices were worried this time, and Kakashi could practically feel their concern as he strode out of ANBU headquarters.

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Thirty-nine hours, four bramble bushes, and one middle-of-the-night ROOT ambush later, Kakashi was regretting that reassurance.

He closed his left eye, panting, and thought, *I jinxed it, didn't I? Reassuring them like that. Minato-sensei, how did you manage to be both so confident and so correct when you told us our missions would go well? Is there some kind of commanding officer karma-compulsion I just never learned?*

Kakashi sat back and shoved half a ration bar in his mouth to chew on while he wrapped a gash on his leg. It wasn't quite deep enough to need stitches, which was good, because Kakashi had always been pretty bad at giving himself stitches.

Once he'd finished tending to himself, he started searching the ROOT shinobi for anything he could use. There were a couple pouches of

kunai that Kakashi shamelessly nicked; he'd lost several of his own in the fight and he didn't fancy looking for them at half past the witching hour.

One of the ROOT nin, the one who'd come at him with chakra scalpels, had a lot of bandages and spare medical supplies—and, alarmingly enough, surgical supplies and a medical-grade sealing scroll that was usually used to carry severed body parts. Usually the head, for bounties, but the mere fact that the med nin had been carrying surgical supplies and had aimed for Obito's eye said plenty about what they likely intended to do had they managed to kill Kakashi.

He stared down at the ROOT nin, fists clenching, anger churning. So Kakashi's life wasn't enough anymore, was it? Danzo wanted Obito's eye as well?

Kakashi took three deliberate steps back and turned away. *Deep breaths*, he told himself. *It helps nothing if I punch a tree.*

*It also*, a bitter, furious part of him whispered, *helps nothing if I tell Sandaime-sama. Sandaime-sama wouldn't do anything even when it was his very own life on the line, so what would Obito's eye matter to him? Obito's eye only matters to me.*

Kakashi gave himself a hard shake and forced himself to pack away all the scavenged supplies and the corpses.

Then he took to the treetops and left. While Kakashi didn't think there would be another squad in the area, he wasn't going to risk it by staying in the area.

When he approached the road to the village, Kakashi decided to take some very reasonable precautions. Everything about his missions that could go wrong was going wrong; some cover surveillance to get better intel was called for.

Kakashi wasn't stepping foot in that village as a Konoha shinobi until he knew everything that went on in there.

As he unsealed his disguise kit and started going through his supplies, Kakashi paused at the sight of a pack of tape included. The label described it as "A vital component of the scrappy delinquent disguise, so you can get that classic look without wasting bandages! Now available in a variety of colors for every occasion!"

Shisui had evidently picked this out and put it in there because there was a note attached to it that read, “You spend a lot of time bandaged up in the hospital, and you’re currently a delinquent on probation, so I thought you should finally look the part. Good luck! Hope you don’t come back looking like a mummy!”

Kakashi’s eye twitched and he silently resolved to get Shisui back for that. But...he hesitated and glanced over the purple tape. Combined with the new curly wig, hair a few shades darker than Rin’s, he could make himself look like Rin.

It was a terrible idea.

Kakashi was going to kill people. The client had ordered the assassination of the entire village, right down to the infants, and Kakashi was under orders to make it look like some kind of plague. Somehow.

Rin would hate this kind of thing.

Kakashi absolutely shouldn’t wear her face while murdering children.

But—Kakashi wanted, suddenly, *desperately* to be able to look at something that wasn’t his team photo and see her face.

Hating himself even as he ripped the pack of “Artisanal Disguise Tape: Rainbow Edition” open, Kakashi began putting together a disguise.

Four hours later, Sukea wandered into the village.

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Tobi sighed melodramatically as he made a weak attempt at shooin a sheep back inside its pen. The sheep pen was on the side of the road, right on the outskirts of the village. Loitering barely within the town limits were a couple of men.

They cast Tobi scornful looks, and one of them reached for his sword threateningly.

Obito rolled his eye behind his mask. As if any of them could be a threat to him, They had as much training as the common bandit.

“Oi,” the one who grabbed his sword barked, “do your damn job properly over there. Or do I need to give you a few more scars for your ugly mug?”

The other one, who stunk of bad tobacco even from several paces away, snorted like a pig before doubling over into wheezing laughter. He was gasping for breath within seconds.

Obito eyed him for half a second; the smoking had probably withered his lungs. It's not like he'd have access to the kind of chakra healing that prevented the Sandaime Hokage's chain-smoking habit from impacting his health.

Still, as much as Obito disdained letting these men think themselves his betters, he *did* have a cover to uphold.

And this cover had a very specific personality with very specific reactions to being threatened.

Tobi made a show of flailing away from them, arms windmilling, and he pretended to squeal in fear. His voice was aggravatingly high-pitched even to his ears, and he was mildly impressed that neither of the two men snapped at him for the volume.

Instead, Sword-wrangler just looked smug and dropped his hand from his hilt. He turned to Smoker Lungs. "I think we should leave this one here for the boss," he said, jerking a thumb at Tobi. "It's too noisy and annoying, and nobody's going to buy product that's so hideous it needs to hide its face behind a mask all the time."

Smoker Lungs nodded, still wheezing as he tried to calm down.

Tobi scowled, even as he turned back to "his" sheep and tried to make it budge.

The two men were part of a trafficking ring that spanned most of southeastern Fire Country, and which was starting to dip its fingers into Wave Country and Tea Country. Their regional boss was the mayor of this village, and he required them to make monthly stops in the village with their "product" so he could "sample" and "train" their wares.

Obito's current disguise was a boy who had supposedly been born with a birth defect so ugly his own mother had forced him to wear a mask to spare the world of having to see his face, and then sold him to the first slaver she could convince to take him.

It had taken a marginally stronger than usual genjutsu to make the slavers believe that lie; this particular group prided itself on having "fine tastes to match their fine clientele," and a hideous boy didn't

exactly match their usual profile.

It was precisely that clientele that Obito was interested in.

The chain of command went a fair bit higher up than this little “mayor” and somewhere near the top of the hierarchy was a noble.

The beloved second son of one of the Fire Daimyo’s favorite advisors, to be exact.

Oh, the chain of command to the trafficking ring wasn’t anything so direct as “unquestioned head of the whole operation,” of course—the noble brat knew better than to have such a clear and obvious tie to a slavery ring—and even if Obito managed to bring to light the administrator with the closest ties to the noble, it wouldn’t bring anything down on the brat’s head.

Really, the administrator in question was more of a friend of a friend of a friend kind of deal. Nothing that could be concretely linked to the noble kid.

But Obito *needed* that noble to be connected to this ring.

It was vital for The Plan.

The Plan demanded more chaos, more violence, more opportunities for the jinchuuriki to be released from the confines of their villages and set upon the battlefield.

The Plan needed a full out war.

And there were two ways to start a shinobi war.

The first was to aggravate tensions between the villages.

Danzo had proved to be a phenomenal ally in that regard, with the “donations” from his ROOT making it look like Konoha was killing off other village’s shinobi. He’d prolonged the end of the Third Shinobi War through that very method.

But eventually, the desire for peace prevailed, and peace talks began. The next step had been sabotaging those peace talks.

Somehow, though, “convincing” the Kumo ambassador to kidnap the Hyuuga heiress hadn’t restarted the war.

Danzo’s ROOT agents had killed the messengers the Hokage had sent

and the message the Raikage had received had only informed him that the Hyuuga head had killed his ambassador without provocation.

And what had the Hokage done when faced with the Raikage's demands for the head of one of his top Jounin? He'd sacrificed the stern bastard's identical twin brother instead.

Not protected his shinobi.

Not given into Danzo's whispers in his ear.

Not resumed the war.

He'd sacrificed one of his Jounin to pacify a man whose very own ambassador seemed to have broken the treaty before the ink was even dry.

"Konoha prides itself on teamwork and camaraderie," his ass.

The Will of Fire was a joke and a lie, and if this was what Konoha's so-called *camaraderie* was really like, it was no wonder Kakashi had ended up the way he had.

Obito regretted telling him a true shinobi protected his friends.

No, a true shinobi was exactly what Kakashi had become after his father's death—a coldhearted, backstabbing murderer who lied through his teeth when he promised to protect his "comrades."

Tobi took a deep breath, and shouted something high-pitched and unnecessarily loud and entirely ineffective at the sheep that just wouldn't go inside the fucking sheep pen already.

It felt strangely cathartic, like screaming into a pillow.

Fortunately, Obito reminded himself through gritted teeth, *fortunately*, there was a second way to incite a shinobi war: through non-shinobi politics.

Theoretically, all shinobi villages obeyed the marching orders of their respective Daimyo. Technically, the Second Shinobi War had ended when the Fire, Wind, Water, Earth, and Lightning Daimyo had come together and *ordered* the Great Shinobi Villages to stop fighting.

If the Daimyo could stop a shinobi war by making treaties with each other, then theoretically they could also *start* a shinobi war by conscripting their hidden village as soldiers. And the civilian

governments were always significantly less...*thorough* about investigating any incidents that would push them towards war.

Luckily, when Obito had gone snooping for dirt on the Daimyo's court, he'd found out about the noble brat's little mistress.

He'd dismissed it at first; having a side chick was practically par for the course in these social strata, and it certainly explained why the noble's brand new wife didn't want to touch her husband.

But it hadn't explained the visceral *disgust* in her eyes whenever she looked at her husband.

That kind of disgust had a story behind it, and Obito *wanted* that story, wanted dirt on someone who was only one step removed from having the Daimyo's ear.

So, he'd gone looking. And he'd found the mistress—the *little* mistress, barely old enough to have her period, but whose maidenhood had already been stripped from her.

Where did an “upstanding” member of society get a girl as young as that to warm his bed?

That question had led Obito to this trafficking ring. And it was *exactly* what he needed to start his war.

This trafficking ring had ties throughout southeastern Fire Country. It specialized in pretty faces, but certain high-standing customers could request faces that fit their tastes—as the noble brat had done—and in its eagerness to fulfill the more “exotic” (read: problematic) tastes of their clientele, the ring was beginning to branch out to Wave and Tea Country.

It was hard to recover the kidnapping victims when they'd been sold in another country.

But anyway, human trafficking was abhorrent to all nations, and if it got out that some Fire Country noble was paying people to kidnap kids from Tea Country to be his underage concubines, the political upheaval would be *legendary*.

Obito could see the way the dominoes would fall already.

The noble brat's father would get defensive of his beloved son and accuse the understandably upset Tea Country nobles of slandering his

son. They would buckle down on their accusations, and make demands of Fire's Daimyo, who would naturally side with his dear friend and the boy he'd watched grow up.

Tensions would rise, old grudges left over from the war would be spurred on by the moral indignity of this trafficking ring, and sooner or later, the Daimyo would declare war on each other.

And what better soldiers did they have to field but their respective village's shinobi?

The only thing Obito had to do was figure out how to concretely tie the noble brat to the trafficking ring, and then tip off the relevant authorities in Tea Country.

Which was why he was here, in the middle of bumfuck nowhere Fire Country, far too close to Konoha for comfort, and pretending to be a particularly ugly slave.

The sheep bleated at him indignantly, payback for being shouted at, and turned it's back on him. Then, because *of course*, this was how Obito's day was going, it proceeded to shit all over Obito's shoe.

Obito stopped short and stared at it. Then, teeth gritted, he promised himself that he would burn this Sage-damned village to *ash* the moment his plan for it was finished.

And if those idiots who fancied themselves his masters had a single damned thing to say—!

But they didn't.

Instead, he heard a low whistle, and Smoker Lungs said softly, "Fuck, *please* tell me that's a lady. She's drop dead *gorgeous*."

Sword-wrangler grunted in agreement, but apparently he wasn't thinking with his dick as much as Smoker Lungs was because he said, "What's up with those stripes? Are they some kind of weird makeup or something?"

"Who cares about the stripes, she looks *hot*. I'd bang her before we took her back to the boss."

"We're six days out from Konoha, you idiot fuck," Sword-wrangler said irritably, and Tobi heard Smoker Lungs yelp as he was smacked over the head. "You know how fast those ninja are said to travel. I've



heard that some of those creepy clans have weird-ass markings all over them. You don't think she's one of those dog fuckers, do you?"

"The dog fuckers?" Smoker Lungs said grumpily, even as Tobi's heart stopped. "Can't be. She doesn't have any dogs." Then, with an audible leer, he added, "I bet she's a good bitch, though. Would take orders *real* well. All that puppy praise, you know."

Tobi barely heard him, barely heard Sword-wrangler's exasperated sigh and another pained yelp.

Instead, he turned around, controlled panic in his throat, because no, *no*, there *couldn't* be any Inuzuka in the area.

What would they even be doing here? The village was barely large enough to be on the map, and as far as Obito knew, the only thing noteworthy about the place was the trafficking ring the mayor ran.

Had Konoha figured out the trafficking connection?

But then his vision, Sharingan clear, snagged on the approaching traveler and his heart just about stopped.

It was a man, he noted vaguely. Though the oversized coat and backpack made it hard to tell, Obito's enhanced vision made it clear that the body hidden beneath wasn't quite feminine.

The face was definitely beautiful enough to distract from that, though, and he could see why Sword-wrangler and Smoker Lungs, with their inferior vision, might have thought it belonged to a woman.

But it wasn't the beauty of that face that stunned Obito so.

No, it was the Nohara stripes decorating it.

Obito leaned forwards a little, unconsciously. The last time he'd seen Nohara stripes had been before the Kyuubi attack. It should've been the last time he'd ever see them too—after all, he'd ordered the Kyuubi to step on their clan grounds in a sudden fit of pique.

He remembered thinking it wasn't fair, not really, that Rin was dead and they weren't. That Minato-sensei's son was being born and none of the attending medics were Rin.

Rin should've been there for the birth of Minato-sensei's son. Their whole team should've been alive and well and getting to observe.

He and Kakashi should've been standing guard as Minato-sensei held Kushina's hand, and Rin told her to push, and Kushina told them all to *fuck off, she knew what to do and she wasn't some pansy who needed help, and so help her if Minato ever wanted another kid, then goddamnit Kushina would invent a Sex Change Jutsu and he could carry the baby his very own self!*

But that hadn't been what was happening.

Instead, Rin was dead, and Kakashi wasn't even allowed to stand guard, and Obito was there to kill the Kyuubi jinchuuriki and the man who could kill an entire contingent of Iwa nin in one go but not rescue his students when they needed him most.

So, Obito had directed the Kyuubi to step on the Nohara clan compound and stab Kushina and Minato-sensei with its claws, and nothing was right anymore, but at least the people Obito hated most for still being alive were now dead.

(Except Kakashi. But honestly, fuck Kakashi.)

Obito blinked and drew back a little, still staring wide-eyed at the curly brown hair and the olive-green eyes and the eggplant purple clan stripes that shouldn't still exist—

Obito had destroyed the Nohara clan. He knew he had, because he'd regretted it the next time he'd gone to Konoha and hadn't seen a single person who looked even a little like Rin, regretted it when he found all their names on the Memorial Stone.

There shouldn't be a single Nohara left.

So, who was this guy?

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The man drew level with them, a soft smile on his face, body posture lax and unconcerned. Obito couldn't spot a single weapons pouch on him.

"Hello," he said, voice so gentle and sweet that Obito was instantly reminded of Rin when she was trying to soothe her patients. "My name is Sukea. I'm a traveling journalist. Is there a village up ahead by any chance?"

"There is," Smoker Lungs said, looking disappointed by the realization

that Sukea was a man, “You looking to stay here for a time?”

*Sukea*, Obito thought, and tried to remember all the family members Rin had mentioned. He didn’t remember a Sukea being among them but—Rin mostly talked about her close relatives, and hadn’t she once mentioned that different branches of the clan wore their stripes in different places? Or was it rank that determined their stripe placement? Personal specialties?

Obito couldn’t remember. The one time Rin had talked about her clan markings, he’d been too busy fantasizing about Rin wearing the uchiwa to listen.

Sukea turned a polite smile on Smoker Lungs. “I am,” he agreed. “It looks like a quaint place, nice and pastoral.” His smile widened a touch. “Those are always popular in the capital newspapers.”

Then Sukea huffed out a cute little laugh, and rubbed the back of his head in embarrassment, “Of course, I’ve also been traveling for a while, so it would be wonderful to stop for a bit and rest.”

Sword-wrangler stepped forwards, expression warm and welcoming and wholly false. “Oh, you’re more than welcome to rest here for a while,” he said pleasantly. “Though I’m afraid that a village this small doesn’t have an inn.”

“Oh,” Sukea said, and that soft mouth pursed into a frown. A hint of tooth flashed as he nibbled on his lip absently. No shinobi worth their kunai would have a habit like that. Too easy to bite through their lip if startled. “Ah, maybe I shouldn’t overstay my welcome then. I’d hate to intrude on someone’s house for an extended period of time.”

Obito was so preoccupied with the way that plump, peachy lip slowly reddened under the nipping that he almost didn’t notice the triumphant gleam in Sword-wrangler’s eye.

“Oh, it’s no problem at all!” Sword-wrangler said cheerfully. “The mayor has plenty of extra space, so I’m sure he wouldn’t mind have a visitor. *Especially* not one who wants to put an article about us in one of those fancy capital newspapers.”

Obito flicked a glance at the two slavers and had a sudden, terrible premonition. Come to think of it, Sukea was exactly the kind of prey they went for, wasn’t he?

# Tsutsuji Village Arc: 2

## Chapter Summary

In which Obito and Kakashi have an open and honest conversation about their reactions to the aftermath of Kannabi and Rin's death, all while having absolutely no idea who the other person is.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The road back to the village proper was a bit of a long one, so Kakashi had plenty of time to talk to these people on his way in.

There was Nagao, who stunk of tobacco so strongly that Kakashi had been able to smell him from what felt like half a mile out. He seemed unreasonably disappointed by Kakashi, though Kakashi had yet to figure out why.

Nagao seemed to be in relatively fine form when they first started walking towards the village, but he quickly began to wheeze as he lagged behind. Kakashi winced internally; he really wasn't in good shape if he was exhausted already.

At least he wouldn't be much of a threat.

Then there was Goroshi, who had a genial smile on, and certainly seemed polite, but something about the way he looked at Kakashi made his skin crawl. Kakashi noticed that he kept rolling his shoulders back and settling his hands on his hips. His left hand would bump into his sword hilt and drift back a little further. Then, he'd hook his thumb into his waistband and wrap his fingers around the sheath.

The gesture seemed almost absent.

Kakashi just wanted to know why the two civilian "town guards," as they had introduced themselves, had swords.

Kakashi was under the impression that this town was calm and quiet, and that there weren't any bandit problems in the area. There shouldn't be any need for swords, let alone the kind of need where touching the hilt became a nervous tic.

Of course, on the scale of sudden difficulties, a bandit problem wasn't exactly the worst thing that could happen. Worse had already happened, after all.

There wasn't much worse, in Kakashi's book, than attempting to kill Kakashi and steal Obito's eye.

But still. It was the principle of the matter.

(Kakashi just wanted *one* mission to be *easy*.)

And then there was the third member of their little troop.

Tobi.

He was dressed in frumpy sackcloth clothes that might have been green once upon a time, but mostly just looked and smelled like dirt. Interestingly enough, under the loose kimono top, Tobi was wearing a long-sleeved, high-necked shirt. Combined with the almost too long pants, the gloves, the socks, and the close-toed shoes, Kakashi couldn't see much of Tobi's skin. In fact, the only piece of skin that Kakashi could see were his ears.

Kakashi couldn't see Tobi's face, either, but that was because Tobi was wearing a mask.

It was a gaudy thing, an orange spiral expanding out from the left eye hole. There wasn't a right eye hole.

Kakashi was very interested in that mask. He'd looked straight at it, directly into where he presumed Tobi's eye was, but he hadn't been able to spot anything.

Even with the lip of the mask casting a shadow over the eye, there should still be something visible. A thin strip of skin, the flutter of an eyelash, light refracting off the iris, *something*.

But there was nothing to see. It was just a black void.

It reminded Kakashi of the ANBU masks.

Engraved upon the inside of Konoha's ANBU masks were seals, designed by Mito-sama herself in the final days of the Shodaime's reign. These identity seals hid all identifying traits of the shinobi wearing the mask. Hair, clan marks, eye color, all of it.

It was why Kakashi could wear his silver hair openly and not be

recognized. It was why Shisui and Itachi could watch people with their Sharingan blazing and nobody could tell, even if they looked them dead in the eye.

Kakashi supposed that it wasn't *totally* implausible that other villages had gotten ahold of the ANBU identity seal—Mito-sama, after all, was both the much older sister of the Shodaime Uzukage and the great-aunt to the Nidaime Uzukage, and both had been her apprentices at one point or another.

Kushina-nee had only been Mito-sama's *last* apprentice, after all. Not the first, not the greatest, not the most accomplished. Just the last.

So, there had been ample opportunity for Mito-sama to show either Uzukage how to create the identity seals. Uzushio could very well have used the same identity seals as Konoha for their ANBU masks. And there was no telling what or how much Kiri and Kumo had stolen from Uzushio when they leveled it.

Ergo, it was possible that other villages had Konoha's identity seal, though Kakashi personally thought it was improbable.

Kiri and Kumo had leveled Uzushio for fear of their seals, after all, and he doubted they would have stolen seals whose purpose they didn't know.

Uzushio fuuinjutsu in general, and Uzumaki fuuinjutsu in *particular*, used a sealing style that was wholly incomprehensible unless you were specifically trained in the style.

Normal fuuinjutsu was to Uzushio fuuinjutsu what a normal book was to a notebook written in a code someone came up with while drunk and concussed. If that was the case, then Uzumaki fuuinjutsu was the sealing equivalent of a notebook written in a language whose alphabet consisted of reasons the neighbor's toddler threw tantrums and whose grammatical structure had been constructed by a group of monkeys drunk on sea brine.

And honestly, considering what the Uzumaki were like... "A group of monkeys drunk on sea brine" was probably the best description of the people who came up with the entire sealing style in the first place.

It was, in short, utter nonsense unless you had a Uzumaki on hand to decipher it—or unless you'd been trained by a Uzumaki and could make out the method behind the madness.

The chances that Kiri and Kumo, who *feared* Uzushio's seals, had understood enough to not only pick out the useful seals but make use of them—no, Kakashi thought it was *very* improbable that they had gotten any identity seals from Uzushio's ruins.

But all that aside—Tobi was supposed to be a civilian. How did *he* get ahold of a copy of the identity seal?

“So, Sukea,” Tobi started, bouncing a little with excitement.

Nagao and Goroshi, Kakashi noted, immediately looked annoyed with Tobi when he started to speak. They'd looked just as annoyed when Tobi had followed them up the road and abandoned the sheep.

“Yes?” Sukea said.

“Where'd you get your stripes? They're so pretty!”

Goroshi looked interested as well. His torso turned a little towards Kakashi, his head tilted, his hand closed on the hilt of his sword again—what was so interesting about Kakashi's little fashion statement?

Kakashi supposed that stripes weren't exactly the most common of all facial markings, but still. They didn't warrant that sword-gripping nervous tic.

Nagao, on the other hand, didn't look interested at all. Nagao looked downright disappointed. He hacked and spat on the side of the road; Kakashi forced himself to look away instead of cringing at the yellowish glob that flew out of the smoker's mouth.

“Hmm, they're just a fashion statement, I suppose. I'm glad to hear that you like them,” Sukea said sweetly. He smiled at Tobi, and was pleased when the gesture made Tobi trip a little. “Where did you get your mask? Orange looks—” *striking, eye-catching, marks your eye out as a target since there's a literal bullseye pointing to it* —good on you.”

“Oh, uh,” Tobi cleared his throat, as if that would erase how breathless he'd sounded at first. “Tobi found it at a festival a while back.”

“Oh, really?” Sukea smiled. Tobi twitched under that look. “Do you like wearing masks?”

Kakashi made a point of pausing, eyes widening like he'd just thought of something, and Sukea rushed to add, “Not that I mean to be rude or

anything! It's just that I don't often see people wearing festival masks outside of those festivals, so I was a little curious."

Tobi rubbed the back of his head in embarrassment. "Oh! Well, Tobi likes to collect masks. One of Tobi's childhood friends used to wear a mask all the time, but Tobi can't see any of Tobi's friends anymore. So, Tobi tries to do things that remind Tobi of Tobi's friends."

He threw his hands up and did a little dance. "And one day, Tobi will be with them again! Tobi has faith that if Tobi keeps doing things that they would want Tobi to do, Tobi will see them again and everything in the world will be right again."

Sukea hummed a little. "That sounds nice," he said peaceably, and pretended not to notice how both Goroshi and Nagao had tensed up when Tobi mentioned not being able to see his friends again. Goroshi had grabbed his sword hilt again, knuckles too white around the hilt to be anything other than a reaction to a threat. But what threat? "Why can't you see your friends again, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Ah, well," Tobi paused for a moment, drooping a little. Grief roughened his voice, dropping his pitch a little. Kakashi felt something twist in his stomach at the sound. Pity, maybe. Or sympathy.

"Well, my one friend and I... we had a bad argument, and Tobi stormed off in anger. And then, while Tobi was gone, Tobi's bestest friend in the whole wide *world* died. When Tobi came back, it was to find Tobi's one friend holding her corpse. Tobi was so *mad* at Tobi's friend... Tobi couldn't stand to be near Tobi's friend. So, Tobi left."

Tobi looked away, wringing his hands. "And Tobi's friend doesn't deserve Tobi's anger. When—when Tobi is mad, it's hard to remember that. But really, it's not Tobi's friend's fault she died. Tobi's friend was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. But... Tobi still can't make himself go home to Tobi's friend."

Tobi swung back around again, forcing cheer into his voice so suddenly that Kakashi knew it was false. "So Tobi decided to make the world a better place until *Tobi* was a better person, a person who could go home to Tobi's friend and not be angry."

"...Ah," Kakashi said, softly. His heart hurt.

He shut his eyes for a moment, remembering Obito storming off after Kakashi tried to move on with the mission and leave Rin. Remembering holding Rin with one arm as he pulled his other hand



from her chest, and the tears spilling down his left cheek as he did so.

He blinked his eyes open again before they could tear up, and felt a strange, bittersweet relief at the ache from Obito's eye.

At least they were crying together. At least they could share that much grief.

"I... started writing," he offered clumsily, "because my best friend died. He saved me from a rockfall, but he wouldn't have needed to if I hadn't been such an—an *idiot*, and just listened to his warning in the first place. He was... the kindest, bravest, most amazing individual I have ever been so blessed as to meet."

Kakashi stopped and swallowed hard. *Keep on topic, Hatake*, he reminded himself. *Don't go gushing about Obito to a complete stranger. There are still ROOT nin looking for Obito's eye, and you don't know where Tobi got his mask. Tobi could be anybody. Even, maybe especially, an enemy.*

"He died when we were kids, though, and I kept thinking there was so much of the world he'd never get to see. I figured I should—"

*Use his left eye to see all the things I thought he'd like, in case he was watching from the Pure Land.*

*Show him all the things he'd never get to see, in the hopes that he could see them through me.*

*Turn myself into a living offering for him—praying all the while, 'take my sight, take my life, **live** my life, please, anything, let me make it up to you somehow—'*

*(I never meant to get you killed, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry—)*

"—find a way," he summarized, "to show him all the things he'd never get to see. And paper burns, like incense, right? And we occasionally burn offerings for the dead so they can receive it in the afterlife. So, I thought maybe this way he could see the world through me. Could live this life vicariously through me."

He smiled helplessly at Tobi and tried not to feel like he'd cheapened the sentiment by lying at the end.

Tobi started at him. It should have been uncomfortable, opening up to a complete stranger like that, but—something about the way Tobi had

lowered his shoulders, about his lax hands and stance, made Kakashi think Tobi understood him the way Kakashi had understood Tobi's grief.

"Yeah," Tobi said quietly, finally. "I get the feeling." He tipped his head the slightest amount, and Kakashi got the impression that there was a sardonic smile behind that mask. "Like we're two caricatures living out our lives in a twisted play, painfully aware that we're a poor replacement for the star of the show who exited stage left far too soon."

Kakashi was too good a shinobi to let his breath hitch, but—Sukea's smile wobbled with emotion. "I couldn't possibly phrase it better myself," he murmured, and didn't wonder if it was him or his mask speaking.

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"Anyway," Tobi said, clearly trying to change the subject to something a little less... intensely personal. "Where did you get your stripes from?"

Kakashi quirked an eyebrow back at him. He sure was stuck on the stripes. Hadn't they already passed this topic?

Tobi flailed his hands when he saw Kakashi looking at him. "Tobi doesn't mean to be rude! Tobi was just curious. See, a long, long, loooonngg time ago, Tobi and his friends were visiting a city and they met some ninja!"

"Oh?" Sukea said.

Tobi bobbed his head in a nod so exaggerated, his whole body seemed to move along with it. "Yep! Tobi got in a bit of a scrape with some oranges—Tobi was trying to help pick up some old lady's dropped groceries, but the oranges kept rolling away from Tobi—and hurt Tobi's knees. Then, while Tobi was trying to find some bandages, a pretty ninja girl came up to help."

Sukea hummed a little to show he was listening.

"She kind of looked like Sukea," Tobi continued, and Kakashi nearly froze in shock.

Looked like *Sukea*?

Sukea, who was based off of *Rin*?

“She had brown hair and purple stripes like Sukea,” Tobi said, gesturing cheerily. “Except hers weren’t under her eyes, they were on her cheeks. Oh! And she didn’t have the purple, umm—” Tobi gestured to his face. “—makeup? Mascara? Or is it called eyeshadow? Tobi doesn’t know anything about makeup, sorry.”

“It’s eyeshadow. Mascara is for your eyelashes and eyeshadow is for your eyelids,” Sukea said mildly, even as Kakashi’s mind whirled.

How could Tobi know about that?

Rin had been dead for close to a decade now. On paper, she had been an unimpressive Chuunin, and her name had been carved into the Memorial Stone before it was even announced that Minato-sensei was going to be the Yondaime Hokage. The other villages had no reason to know she existed, let alone for one of their agents to be able to recognize Sukea as “looking like her.”

There was no way a foreign shinobi should be able to recognize her. Most Konoha-born shinobi wouldn’t have recognized her.

Unless, of course, Tobi was ROOT.

Danzo would have access to Rin’s records, among which was a picture ID. He could have distributed Rin’s picture and a profile of her to his agents in order for them to use against Kakashi.

It wasn’t like Kakashi’s hangups regarding his team were a *secret*.

Danzo had already tried to use Minato-sensei against Kakashi once, back when he was trying to convince Kakashi to kill Sandaime-sama.

If he had no moral issues trying to leverage Kakashi’s feelings for Minato-sensei, who existed in the gray space between teacher and Hokage and surrogate father, he certainly wouldn’t think twice about using some dead kunoichi from a minor, now-extinct clan.

If Tobi was ROOT, that would explain his knowledge of Rin. He was probably trying to use her to throw Kakashi off his game. It would even explain where he got a mask with an identity seal standard to Konoha’s ANBU corps.

Except—the story.

The details behind Tobi's knowledge of Rin.

Those weren't recorded anywhere that Danzo could find.

Kakashi himself only vaguely remembered that Rin used to practice her medical jutsu on civilians with minor injuries back when she was first learning to heal humans. She'd done it a few times before she'd been cleared to start fixing up Kakashi and Obito.

She'd always said that it was good practice, and if she messed up, at least it wouldn't affect her teammates' health. They'd all known that she did it primarily because she couldn't stand sitting idly by and not helping others.

At the time, Kakashi had been dismissive of this little habit. He'd called it a waste of time and chakra and told her not to practice on humans until she was officially cleared to heal people. As a result, Rin didn't often tell Kakashi when she was doing this. She'd probably done it at least a dozen more times than Kakashi knew about.

Nobody had ever written it down on a mission report, since it wasn't ever relevant to their missions, and the first and only time Kakashi had gone to record it anyway, Minato-sensei had sighed and told him to leave it off. Having a "practiced on human patients without appropriate supervision" note on Rin's file would only slow down her progress towards becoming a full med nin.

Kakashi had acquiesced.

He'd been a stonehearted kid, but he was also ruthlessly practical. He hadn't wanted an asset like Rin's burgeoning medical skills to be banned from usage over something so minor.

But that meant that Rin's little quirk was only known to herself, her teammates, and her patients. Kakashi had never told another soul about it—honestly, he'd forgotten about it entirely until Tobi had reminded him—and the rest of Team Minato had been dead for over half a decade now.

Which just left her civilian patients. None of whom had ever stepped foot *near* Konoha.

Danzo couldn't *possibly* have known about Rin doing this. He'd have no way of knowing. So, Tobi couldn't be a ROOT nin acting on his orders—not with the knowledge of Rin that he had.

It was... theoretically possible that Tobi really was one of Rin's civilian pro-bono patients. It wouldn't explain where he'd gotten that mask, but it would explain why he'd been able to recognize Sukea and the stripes.

Unfortunately, Kakashi hadn't paid enough attention to this "useless" habit of Rin's to be able to identify any of her patients. Especially not when that prospective patient wore an ANBU grade mask.

"That's really interesting, Tobi," Sukea said, letting exactly none of his thoughts show on his face or in his voice. He blinked at Tobi, looking utterly guileless. "Can you tell me more about her?"

*So I can judge how much you know about my dead teammate,* Kakashi added silently.

"Uh, well," Tobi poked his fingers together. "She was really nice? She saw Tobi had scraped his knees up and then her hands went all green and glowing—and then it was like *whoosh!* and suddenly Tobi wasn't bleeding anymore. It was really cool! Tobi was so shocked, Tobi was stunned silent."

That was probably a fair assessment from a civilian. Tobi likely hadn't known that chakra healing existed before that moment.

"She left, though," Tobi said, "before Tobi got his voice back. Tobi didn't even get to say thank you. So, when Tobi saw that Sukea had purple stripes like her—ah, Tobi didn't mean to be rude about it! Tobi just thought that maybe they were one of those strange clan things, and Sukea was related to her. Tobi was hoping Sukea could pass on Tobi's thanks!"

Kakashi hummed for a moment, more to stall for time than to avoid answering. He put together a story, vague and conveniently unverifiable, before opening his mouth again.

"Well," Sukea said, and scratched the back of his head sheepishly. "To be honest, I told a *little* bitty lie when I said my stripes are a fashion statement. I mean, that's all they are to *me*, but my mother was another story entirely."

He lowered his hand and idly hooked it around the strap of his backpack, shifting it to a more comfortable position. "You see, my mother slept with some Konoha guy and that's how she ended up pregnant with me. Of course, being a ninja, he was gone by morning light—you know how those stories go." Sukea offered Tobi a

conspiratorial smile. “They’re like youkai tales—mysterious and deadly, and the subject is always conveniently gone when you try to verify what you *thought* you saw.”

Tobi laughed, bright and cheery and emoting with his whole body.

Kakashi was strangely charmed by that. It reminded him of how Obito used to laugh, like the force of his joy was shaking him all over.

Kakashi continued, “She’s insisted, all my life, that the man had these distinctive purple stripes up his face. Clan marks, she called them. She’d wag her finger at me and tell me, ‘Sukea, you’d better behave! One day, your father is going to come back for you, and he’s going to find the world’s most criminally bad boy instead of a dutiful son, and then who’ll want you? Not him and definitely not his clan, that’s for sure! You could have it *made* if you join up with his clan, but if you keep misbehaving, *well.*’ *And then she’d always put her hand on her hip and give me that disappointed Mom Face, you know the one.*”

As he spoke, he gestured along, mimicking what his supposed “mother” would do as she gave this lecture.

Tobi nodded again, enthusiastic. “Ah, yes, the Mom Face,” he said sagely. “It only says ‘I’m disappointed in you’ and yet it somehow hits harder than anger ever could.”

Sukea chuckled. “Spoken like someone who was on the receiving end of it far too many times,” he teased.

Tobi gasped, whole upper body reeling back with melodramatic shock. He slapped a hand to his chest with an audible *smack*. “How dare you?!” he wailed. “Tobi was a *good boy* growing up! Tobi was the *goodest* boy, even!”

Sukea’s fake chuckle turned into a full-blown laugh. Kakashi ducked down a little, shoulders bowing inward, eyes closing, a fist pressed to his mouth in a futile attempt to stifle it.

He hadn’t expected to find Tobi *this* amusing.

When Kakashi managed to calm the sudden giggle fit, he straightened up to find Tobi had frozen again, and was clearly staring at him.

“Ah, is something wrong, Tobi?” Sukea asked, suddenly self-conscious. That was a bit of a strong reaction to a bit of teasing, wasn’t it? It probably came off as very weird.

Tobi jolted and then flailed his arms in a frantic windmill. “No, no, no!” he said hurriedly. “There’s nothing wrong! Tobi just wasn’t expecting Sukea to like Tobi’s joke so much.”

His voice, Kakashi noted, had gone oddly squeaky.

Tobi cleared his throat. “Anyway, you were saying?”

“...ah, yes,” Sukea said. “Well, when I was about, hmm, seven or so? Maybe eight? Sometime around there. She took me to get these stripes tattooed on. Said I should get my stripes so my father would know I was his kid.”

He smiled again, let it fade into something bemused. “Honestly, I kind of thought she was full of it. Seeing things in the dark, having a vivid dream, misremembered a bruise—those ‘stripes’ could’ve been anything. I got tired of being asked about them when I was a kid, so ‘fashion statement’ became my default answer for that question.”

He waved a hand at Tobi. “But I guess now I know that Mom *wasn’t* going crazy when she said there was a clan of brown-haired ninja with purple stripes out there. You wouldn’t happen to know the name of this girl, would you? Maybe I can track her down and meet my distant cousin.”

“Ah, hmm,” Tobi crossed his arms and put a finger on his chin as he thought. “Tobi doesn’t remember exactly... it’s been a while. Tobi thinks it was Suzu, though? Nohara Suzu? Something like that. It had to do with bells.”

Sukea hummed. “Nohara Suzu,” he echoed.

*Rin*, Kakashi thought, *he’s definitely thinking of Rin*.

Sukea smiled at Tobi, warm and pleased. “Well! I’ll keep the family name in mind, seeing as that’s probably my father’s clan name. Thank you so much, Tobi!” Then, on impulse, he reached out and grabbed Tobi’s hands to shake them enthusiastically.

Tobi jolted, and for a moment, his hands slipped through Kakashi’s. Then he turned them and gripped back. He laughed again, this time sounding a little shy. “Oh, it’s no problem! Tobi is glad that Tobi could help!”

He paused, then leaned in a little, and though Kakashi couldn’t see his face, everything else about him screamed *mischievous*. “Was Tobi a good

boy? Helping Sukea with this?”

Sukea blinked once, then his smile cracked into an honest *grin*. Kakashi barely remembered in time to stop himself from flashing his too-sharp canines as Tobi. The Hatake dog teeth would definitely give the whole game away.

Sukea leaned in as well, so their faces were barely an inch apart. Even from this close, he couldn't see anything through the eyehole of the mask. “Oh, Tobi,” he said, solemnly. “You are the *best* boy.”

## Chapter End Notes

Tobi: What's with your stripes?

Sukea: Sorry, you have to be at least friendship level 5 to unlock my tragic backstory. What's with your mask?

Tobi: Sorry, you have to be at least friendship level 5 to unlock MY tragic backstory.

[Relationship test with REDACTED passed!]

[Relationship test with REDACTED passed!]

Tobi:

Sukea:

Tobi: ...Well, I guess I'll go first.

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Meanwhile, in the background of this entire chapter:  
Goroshi (Sword-wrangler) and Nagao (Smoker Lungs): yo what the fuck is going on



# Tsutsuji Village Arc: 3

## Chapter Summary

In which Obito blatantly projects his crush on Rin onto his other teammate.

When they arrived at the mayor's house, Sukea gave it a wide-eyed, impressed look.

"Oh," he said. "I see what you mean about the mayor having a lot of space." He turned a polite smile on Sword-wrangler.

Obito was strangely pleased to note that it wasn't the same kind of smile that he'd given Obito during their banter.

That one had flashed the slightest hint of teeth and made Sukea's eyes crinkle with the force of his joy; this one barely qualified as a smile. It was more of a mild upward tilt to Sukea's lips.

Sword-wrangler made a show of rubbing the back of his neck and said, "Yeah, the mayor's house is pretty big, isn't it? He never runs out of space."

Obito looked it over, and wondered if Sukea caught the incongruity of it.

This was such a small, quiet, out of the way village. There wasn't much trade flowing through, and the nearest civilian town was still too far away, and Konoha too frightening, for trips to another town's farmer's market to be a regular occurrence.

Ergo, there wasn't much cash flowing in or out of the village.

The mayor lived alone, and his family, back when he still had one, was never the biggest.

So why did he own a full manor?

Compared to the other worn-down village buildings, it was practically a gold-plated palace.

The answer, because this word was a filthy, awful trash heap, was slavery.

The mayor's unusual wealth was gained from his dabbling in the trafficking ring, and he'd used it to build himself a decent sized manor. The numerous "empty" rooms were used when groups of slavers and their victims, such as Smoker Lungs and Sword-wrangler's little cell, stopped by for their "quality control check."

Even as Tobi followed Sword-wrangler and Smoker Lungs and Sukea inside the suspiciously opulent home, he seethed. Obito knew damn well what these men wanted with a pretty face like Sukea's and he wasn't about to let them have it.

Obito didn't *care* about fixing the minor trash heaps of this world. The current reality was just a dumpster in disguise, and there was no point in trying to clean the dumpster when every second of every minute, someone else was dumping more sewage onto the preexisting piles.

But he did care about Rin, and he cared about things that Rin had cared about, and Rin had cared about her family.

Obito had fucked up when it came to killing off the Nohara clan, he'd admit that.

At the time, he'd been so angry at the world—the kind of angry that made his head pound and his teeth grit. The kind of angry that made his breath come fast, made him sweat, made his heart *ache* from the sheer force of his fury.

Some awful, wicked part of him, the part that had absorbed all the world's lies and violence and evil and *loved it*—that part had whispered to him, "If you kill all of them, things will be a little fairer. Rin's dead, so *they* should be dead, and they can all have their happy reunion in the Pure Land."

And Obito had listened, and killed the people Rin had loved, and nothing had been right or fairer. The world had just been empty of a few unfamiliar faces with familiar features.

But then there was *Sukea*.

Sukea, who was Rin's illegitimate cousin.

Sukea, who looked like Rin, talked like Rin, was gentle like Rin.

Sukea, who was exactly the kind of person Rin would have gotten along with.

*Rin would love Sukea, Obito thought dazedly. He'd be her favorite cousin, without a doubt.*

Except—except they never could have met.

Their worlds were so different, they might have as well have been born on different planets.

Rin was a kunoichi from the start. She was born in a minor shinobi clan; there had never been any question about *if* she'd go to the Academy.

Sukea, though. Sukea was civilian through and through. He couldn't possibly be anything else.

He didn't have a single weapons pouch on him, he nibbled on his lip like he'd never worried about biting through it if startled, he didn't watch his surroundings, he'd even spent an entire conversation referring to shinobi as “ninja.”

One of the most subtle tells shinobi had when playing civilian was incorrect terminology. Or, rather, correct terminology when there shouldn't be.

Non-hidden village civilians always referred to shinobi as *ninja*. Civilians who lived in a hidden village tended to know better, but their out-of-village counterparts didn't, and one way Obito had learned to tell when someone was shinobi in disguise was to look at how they described shinobi.

Terms like “shinobi,” “kunoichi,” “Jounin,” etc. were dead giveaways that the speaker knew a *little* too much about shinobi systems.

And sure, some of those words, especially shinobi and kunoichi, meant basically the same thing. But that just made them more *attractive*, for lack of a better phrase.

After all, why would you use the same words over and over again when you can switch it up a little?

Most people didn't even think about it—some part of their brain just went “uh oh, I've used *ninja* too many times now. It's starting to not sound like a real word. Time to switch it up with a synonym!”

It was only to a discerning ear that the tell become apparent.

And Sukea hadn't slipped up even once.

Even the best infiltrator would have had a *very* strong urge to use any term other than “ninja” to describe their “parent,” after listening to Toi prattle on and on about “ninja this” and “ninja that” and “ninja girl.”

So Sukea was a civilian, and was as civilian as they came.

Because he was civilian, Sukea could be unabashedly gentle and sweet and *soft*.

He could reach out and hold a stranger's hands without worrying about being within stabbing distance.

He could chew on his lip without worrying about biting through it if he was ambushed—a habit Rin had had, and which Obito remembered her trying and failing to train herself out of.

Sukea could walk right up to slavers and chatter about a cute dog he saw the other day without worrying that they were up to no good, because it never occurred to him that there were cruel people out there who would commit atrocities for something as petty as cash.

Sukea could do all of that because Sukea lived in a kind world where bad things didn't happen to good people—a world where violence was far enough away, it could be forgotten entirely. A world where shinobi were tall tales your mother came up with to explain away a drunken hookup, instead of the person you saw in the mirror every day.

*Sukea, Obito thought longingly, was very much like what Rin would've been, if she'd been born to a civilian family instead of in a shinobi village.*

That thought felt revolutionary.

Obito had thought a lot about what his dream in Infinite Tsukuyomi would be.

He'd figured most of it out already. He'd go back to before Kannabi Bridge, and there wouldn't be a need for the Kannabi Bridge mission.

The Third Shinobi War would never start, so Kakashi's father wouldn't kill himself. Since Kakashi's father never died, Kakashi wouldn't turn into that stone-cold rules-obsessed comrade killer. He'd still be the smiling kid who used to play in the public park, who pouted when he'd lose Kick the Can, and who always won Hide and Seek.

It would be Obito and Rin and the happy-Kakashi on Minato-sensei's genin team, and they'd be a *real* team, not one that as always fraught with arguments and overblown egos.

They'd take courier missions and see the world together, and Obito could show Rin all the food stalls and out-of-the-way haunts he'd discovered.

They'd take bandit hunting missions, and he and Kakashi would compete to see who could beat more of them. Obito hadn't yet decided if he wanted to win all the time or if it'd be more fun to lose sometimes, so it could be a proper neck-and-neck rivalry like what Kakashi and Gai had.

But either way, at the end of the day, Rin would laugh at them and patch them up, and tease them for getting along so well, and they'd go home to Konoha.

There, Minato-sensei would be waiting with Kushina and there'd be a warm meal waiting, and laughter around the Namikaze-Uzumaki dinner table, and everything would be *right* with the world.

But clearly, Obito hadn't thought his peaceful world all the way through.

No, even in his ideal world, Rin would still be a kunoichi, still a field medic, still going out into battlefields and killing.

Even in the world Obito thought would be free from war and violence—wouldn't his own dream require minor trash heaps to exist? For Obito to sweep in and play the dashing hero Rin's beautiful princess, killing off slavers like this group, there still had to be scum of the earth to kill off in the first place.

It was an oxymoron. It couldn't possibly be.

To have Obito's ideal world without violence, there still had to be violence.

No, Obito had clearly miscalculated somewhere.

A true world at peace, a world without violence or hatred or cruelty—that world would look like the one Sukea lived in.

Peaceful. Violence so far away it was unfathomable. The blood-soaked shadows of shinobi life reduced to no more than a fable for a child.

In a perfect world, Rin wouldn't be a kunoichi. She'd be a civilian, because there would never be any need for shinobi in the first place.

No greed. No cruelty. No hate. No war, or violence, or pain. No demand for any of these vile things, and therefore, nobody to supply it.

The mere thought of it nearly took Obito's breath away. He couldn't believe he'd never thought of it before—that he'd never caught the fallacy in his own ideal world before.

That he'd never thought about Rin would *look* like, in a world completely devoid of conflict.

And he had Sukea to thank for this realization.

Sukea was the perfect mirror of what Rin would look like, in a world at peace. Soft and gentle, sweet-natured and far too trusting. Biting at his lip and only regretting it when he bit a little too hard and drew blood. Pouting when he did, instead of sighing at himself for the habit.

Obito watched as Sukea ran his tongue over the bead of blood on his lip, licking it away, before he smiled up at the mayor.

Sukea looked far too cute like that, all snuggled up in his jacket, kneeling at the low dinner table, and Obito knew he wasn't the only one who thought so.

He caught the hint of lust in the mayor's eyes, as the slaver looked at Sukea's lips, and his blood boiled. His fists clenched, and he felt his Sharingan slip into its Mangekyo form almost unconsciously.

Sukea belonged to a world where bad things never happened to good people.

Obito would make *sure* he stayed in that safe, idyllic bubble, even if he had to break his cover to protect Rin's would-be favorite cousin from these men.

--

When Smoker Lungs brought out the tea, Obito knew exactly what they were planning. It wasn't the first time he'd seen them pull this trick. It was even a classic shinobi assassination trick.

Get your target somewhere alone and give them poisoned tea.

Or drugged, in this case, and instead of slitting the victim's throat while they thrash, you bring the victim to the metaphorical torture chambers while they're out of it.

These slavers were going to feed Sukea drugged food.

Over Obito's *dead body*, they would.

Tobi screeched and jerked to his feet, flailing his arms as he went. "Bug!" he wailed. "There's a bug! Get it off of Tobi! Get it off!" He made a show out of staggering backwards.

"Hey, watch it!" Smoker Lungs said sharply, and tried to veer away from him at the last moment.

Luckily, Tobi's pants made for the perfect excuse.

Obito made sure to step on one too-big, too-baggy pant leg, and "tripped," careening sideways into Smoker Lungs. The fine china went flying.

There was a ringing *crash* as the tea set collided with the ground. Porcelain shards scattered, hot tea soaked the ground, and while Smoker Lungs was able to catch himself on the wall, Tobi landed smack dab in the middle of it all.

He howled.

It wasn't the worst pain Obito had ever been subjected to, not by a long shot, but it still wasn't pleasant. And Tobi had no reason to hold back the sounds of his pain.

"Tobi!" Sukea said, alarmed, and hurried over to him. "Oh, are you okay? Here, let's get you up out of this mess."

"My tea set!" The mayor spluttered, even as Smoker Lungs jarred upright again and shouted, "*Tobi!*"

Obito blinked up at Sukea, at the wide olive-green eyes staring down at him, at the crease in his brow.

From this close, Obito noticed the slightest nick in Sukea's left eyebrow, like an old childhood scar.

He kind of wanted to touch it, feel the slight dip of it against his

thumb.

“Tobi,” Sukea repeated, “are you okay? Are you bleeding?”

Sage, he even *sounded* like Rin.

Obito’s voice was wobbly with heartbroken nostalgia, and there was no way he could hide it, so he didn’t try. Instead, he “forced” himself to sound brave.

“I’m okay, Sukea.” Tobi promptly sniffled, ruining whatever bravado he’d managed to put together.

Sukea, bless his sweet heart, didn’t even look exasperated by Tobi blatantly trying to put up a brave front in front of him.

He just pursed his lips and reached for his hand. “Here,” he said kindly, “let’s get you up out of this. That hot tea can’t be comfortable to sit in.”

“It’s not,” Tobi mumbled, and tried to put his hand down onto the ground to help himself stand up.

Sukea’s eyes went wide, and he said hurriedly, “Wait, don’t—”

Too late.

Tobi put his hand down directly into a shard of porcelain, and promptly snatched it away with a pained wail.

Obito grimaced at intentionally doing that to himself, but Tobi was the kind of idiot who would do that without thinking.

Sukea looked even more worried now, “Oh, Tobi,” he said helplessly. “Give me your hand. I’ll pull you up. The ground’s not safe to touch.”

Tobi hiccupped dramatically, and clutched his injured hand to his chest, but gave Sukea the other one.

Sukea took it and pulled, heaving Tobi upright in one fluid motion.

Behind his mask, Obito’s eye went wide.

Sukea was *strong*, a lot stronger than Obito had thought he’d be.

*It must be that heavy backpack of his*, Obito rationalized. *It probably weighs a ton, since civilians can’t use sealing scrolls to carry their travel*



gear, and Sukea's just used to carrying around everywhere.

His face felt a little warm for some reason.

"Th—thanks, Sukea," Tobi said, his voice gone squeaky.

Sukea gave him a soft smile. "It's no problem," he said, before turning to Tobi's hand.

To Obito's *right* hand, the Zetsu prosthetic.

Sukea reached for it with his free hand. "Let me look at that. It won't do to leave any porcelain in there, and I've got bandages in my pack."

Obito's prosthetic was already healed. There was nothing to bandage, and the skin was blatantly not human.

Tobi twitched and tried to back off. Sukea's grip on his hand tightened, refusing to let him move more than a single step away.

"Ah, you don't need to do that!" Tobi babbled. "Sukea doesn't need to waste his bandages on Tobi. Tobi was the one who got himself hurt." Just to be sure, he stuffed his injured hand behind his back.

Sukea's soft smile turned into a frown. Obito kind of hated himself for causing that change in expression.

"Don't say that, Tobi," he scolded. "It was an accident, and you're hurt. It won't be a waste of bandages at all. I always over prepare, so I've got plenty. Please, let me take care of you."

Obito flushed, and he swallowed hard, mouth gone dry.

"No, no, Sukea," Smoker Lungs interrupted, reminding them that they weren't alone. "*Tobi's*—" he glared at Tobi as he said this, "—got a point. Don't waste your bandages on him. We can get someone else to patch him up."

Sukea turned that frown on him. "But," he started.

The mayor came up behind them and clapped a hand on Sukea's shoulder. "It will be fine. I'll have one of the serving girls take care of Tobi. They've got tweezers. You know women, always have to have their makeup kits on them." He laughed, short and sharp and demeaning.

Sukea's frown didn't abate. If anything, it got worse.

Obito went out on a limb and guessed that Sukea hadn't agreed with the mayor's casual misogyny.

Obito gripped Sukea's hand a little tighter. "It's okay, Sukea!" he chirped. "The new pot of tea and the food should be done around the time Tobi is done being patched up, so Tobi will just bring them back when aaaalll better."

Sukea hesitated, but eventually relaxed and nodded. "I suppose," he murmured. Then he smiled at Obito, a little shy. "You're sure you're okay?" he checked.

Obito gave a wildly exaggerated nod. "Tobi is sure!"

"...oh, alright." Sukea said. His hand relaxed, allowing Obito to pull himself free of Sukea's grasp.

His hand spasmed a little and Obito flexed it intentionally, glad that his mask hid his wince. Sukea had a crushingly strong grip for a civilian.

A hand clapped Tobi on the shoulder, then pulled him away roughly. "Don't worry, Sukea," Smoker Lungs said with false cheer. "I'll personally make sure that Tobi's all stitched up again."

The mayor smiled and nodded. "He'll be fine. Tobi's a clumsy one anyway; we're always having to patch him up. Which is why I assigned him to work the sheep pens today, in the hopes that he could stay out of trouble out there."

Obito made a show out of pouting with his whole body. He slumped down melodramatically, and whined, "But the sheep don't *like* Tobi."

"Who does?" Smoker Lungs muttered, not quite under his breath, and the mayor looked like he strongly agreed with that statement.

Sukea, on the other hand, just looked fond. "I do," Sukea said peacefully. "You remind me of my best friend, Tobi, just a little sillier."

He gave Tobi a playful wink. "But it's the fun kind of silly. I haven't laughed so hard in a very long time."

Obito's face felt hot again, and he didn't have to put any effort at all into his high-pitched Tobi voice. "Oh! Tobi's so glad Sukea likes Tobi! Tobi likes Sukea very much too!"

“And Tobi needs to go get patched up now,” Smoker Lungs said pointedly. “So we’re going to go do that.”

Tobi heaved a dramatic sigh and smiled behind his mask when Sukea’s smile brightened with honest amusement again.

He allowed himself to be led out of the room, craning his neck a little to see Sukea step away from the mayor’s hand as he walked back to his seat.

Good.

Obito didn’t want that slimeball touching Sukea any more than was absolutely necessary—and as far as he was concerned, it wasn’t necessary at all.

He and Smoker Lungs only made it a few hallways away, before Smoker Lungs turned and slammed him up into the wall.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” He snarled, rancid breath fanning into Obito’s face. “You should remember who *owns* you now. What, do you think you’re going to save that—”

Obito grimaced at the smell and used Kamui to phase through him. The man staggered, eyes going wide.

Smoker Lungs whirled around, gawking, only to be immediately ensnared in Obito’s genjutsu. It didn’t take more than a second of thought to weave, and was little more than a compulsion, a blurring of memories.

Smoker Lungs would think he’d “disciplined” Obito effectively, and that he’d dosed the new tea with the drug. In the meantime, he’d just stand there blankly until Obito put the tray in his hands.

While Smoker Lungs was staring off into space, Obito warped himself into Kamui.

The Plan required a lot of political networking to get the war going, and it had occasionally become necessary to eat dinner with his various political puppets. Given these puppets’ identities and the content of their clandestine meetings, Obito couldn’t trust either the food nor the drink he was served.

Danzo was hardly the only war hawk who believed in preemptive execution of political enemies. And someone like Obito, who was

seeking a war yet had no known affiliation to a village, was *bound* to become an enemy of their eventually.

His prosthetics allowed him to heal at an astounding rate, but he'd never tested their efficiency with poisons, and he had no desire to do so during one of these meetings.

Ergo, Obito had taken to keeping general antidotes on him and in his Kamui to use as needed. It was perhaps the only edible shinobi supplies he kept. The only edible thing he owned *period*.

He snatched a few packets of that general antidote now, and left Kamui.

Sword-wrangler yelped as Obito manifested right next to hm, and the unfortunate "servants" currently stuck in the mayor's house looked equally startled.

Their expressions quickly smoothed out, though, as Obito tucked them into the same genjutsu he'd left on Smoker Lungs. After a moment, the cooks returned to cooking, Sword-wrangler continued staring vacantly at Obito's shoulder, and Obito shamelessly dropped two packets of the general antidote into the pot of miso soup bubbling away.

He had plenty of extra packets, after all, and there was no harm in ensuring all of Sukea's food would be safe for consumption.

Then, just to occupy himself while the food cooked, Obito whisked himself away to Kamui and opened a tiny, imperceptible portal to watch from.

To his relief, Sukea looked fine. He was sitting calmly back in his place at the low dinner table, across from the mayor, and was nodding along politely to the mayor's speech.

Right now, they were talking about how the mayor's great-great-great-grandpa had braved the wrath of the warring clans to build his giant well, and now the entire village and their stinking sheep drank from it.

Obito rolled his eyes. That was a *real* fascinating topic, all right. Perfect for dinner conversations.

But Sukea, who was a journalist by trade and choice, seemed deeply interested in this useless bit of trivia. Obito supposed it must be more interesting to the stuck-up nobles or whoever it was that read Sukea's

“idyllic pastoral articles featuring unknown stretches of the countryside.”

Actually...hmm, that was an idea.

Obito made a mental note to follow up on that later and returned to the kitchen to check the progress of the food and tea.

Once they were done, Obito grabbed the serving tray and followed a grumpy Sword-wrangler out of the kitchen. They found Smoker Lungs waiting patiently, right where Obito had left him, and Obito handed him the tray of food.

Trigger met, Smoker Lungs blinked awake again and started walking. Neither he nor Sword-wrangler questioned why a disciplined “slave” was coming back to the dinner table.

Tobi made a point of skipping ahead of them to the dining room doors and throwing them open.

“Sukea!” he crowed and was delighted to see Sukea’s attention snap over to him.

His pretty green eyes were wide open, and he looked adorably like a newborn fawn who’d just discovered that water was wet.

“Look! Tobi is aaaalll better now, as promised.”

That startled look faded in favor of a genuine, pleased smile, and Sukea’s eyes crinkled in relief. “Oh, that’s great to hear, Tobi.” Sukea said warmly. He patted the seat next to him. “Here, sit next to me. I saved you a spot.”

Well, with an offer like that, how could Obito refuse?

# Tsutsuji Village Arc: 4

## Chapter Summary

In which one member of Team Minato blatantly projects his crush on his dead teammate onto the person he thinks is a stranger.

(Spoiler: it's not Obito this time.)

## Chapter Notes

Sorry for the late release. This chapter has been fighting me all week.

After dinner, Obito made certain to trap the corridor outside Sukea's bedroom while Sukea prepared for bed. He left the path to and from the bathroom alone, making it the only clear part of the hallway.

That way, the part of the hallway Sukea was likely to wake up and use during the night was free, and the traffickers couldn't get to him while Sukea slept.

They would certainly try, since they thought they had drugged Sukea's food.

Of course, Obito could also keep watch to prevent them from getting in, since his prosthetics meant that he no longer required sleep.

A truly productive use of Obito's night would have been to just go ahead and deal with them so Sukea wouldn't have to worry at all.

Instead, Obito slipped into Kamui and watched Sukea sleep all night long.

Sukea must have been exhausted from his journey, because he dropped off to sleep almost immediately.

It was... really adorable.

Sukea had this way of curling up into a ball and migrating to the corner of his mattress, like he had an invisible bedmate pushing him off his own bed.

Obito watched him drowse, feeling oddly at peace.

He kind of wanted to peek at Sukea's face to see the look on it while he slept. To see the flicker of his eyes as he dreamt. To know intimate little details, like if he drooled in his sleep the way Obito used to, back when he still *could* sleep.

He'd have to actually enter the room and disturb Sukea if he wanted to see that, though.

Sukea slept on his left side, face smooshed so deep into the pillow that his left eye was completely covered. Every once in a while, he rocked back a little to breathe, but he'd turn back into his pillow almost immediately.

It was charming.

Which was a strange thing to think; Obito hadn't found someone else's sleep habits cute since... well, he *wanted* to say Rin, with her sleep mumbling and the way she'd kick her blankets off at night.

Both he and Kakashi had gotten kicked awake more than once on missions.

On one memorable occasion, she'd kneed Kakashi in the stomach while sleep-shouting, "Just give me the blueberries already, Sage damn it!"

Obito, who's been on watch at the time, had just about died laughing.

But, honestly, the last time he'd actually thought someone's sleep habits were cute was with Kakashi. Kakashi, Obito had discovered, had eight dogs and they all slept on the same bed with him. Considering the sheer size and number of them, Kakashi tended to get shoved off to the side of his own bed.

He also tended to sleep in strange contortions that had *looked* uncomfortable on missions but made perfect sense when Obito had seen the way the summons shoved Kakashi's too-long limbs around to make space for themselves.

Obito had to close the Kamui portal so he could laugh himself sick without waking Sukea.

Thoughts of Kakashi's sleep habits had him remembering the time Kakashi, then seventeen years old and being tested for ANBU captaincy, had come back from a mission concussed. He'd summoned his dogs and told them not to let him go to sleep.

Of course, having also been awake for almost seventy consecutive hours, he'd been exhausted and he'd kept trying to fall asleep.

Every time he'd try, one of his dogs would bark, "Boss! Wake up!"

After the first six times they'd done that, they'd decided to start getting *creative* about it—the barks had been accompanied by nips, or by them jumping on Kakashi's stomach, or by them licking his face until he shoved them off.

But Bull took the cake for the funniest wake-up call.

At one point, Kakashi had *almost* fallen asleep, and Bull had decided the best way to keep him awake was to start howling. Kakashi had jolted upright again and stared at his pack in wide-eyed confusion as the rest of them joined in.

Kakashi had stared at them, blinking erratically, too sleep-groggy to understand what was happening and why. Then he'd shrugged, visibly giving up on understanding, tipped his head back, and *howled* along with them.

One of the dogs—the one whose name Obito could never remember and always thought of as Mohawk dog—had been so surprised, he stopped howling. The rest of the pack had kept up the howling until they'd had to stop so they could laugh themselves sick at Kakashi's response.

Even then, Kakashi had kept howling for a few minutes longer, before the lack of accompaniment finally registered to him and he trailed off. He'd looked at his dogs, then, visibly baffled, swaying in place.

He'd looked so *dumb*.

Four years later, and the memory *still* made Obito collapse into peals of laughter. It was a sure-fire way to cheer himself up.

But he couldn't put off dealing with the slavers' interest in Sukea forever. Not even for a chuckle.

Which was why Obito was going to go deal with them. Any second now. Aaaaannyy second now. *Really*.

Okay fine, so maybe Obito could just put the same "I *think* we drugged Sukea already" genjutsu over Smoker Lungs and Sword-wrangler so he could attend breakfast with Sukea without worrying about the food



being drugged.

And if Sukea wanted to take a walk around the village and interview the people, well, at least Obito didn't have to worry about him getting kidnapped out *there*. The only people involved in the trafficking ring in the village were the mayor, Sword-wrangler, and Smoker Lungs, and all three of them were still in the manor.

Obito did feel a little bad for poor Sukea, though. He was just trying to get an interview, but nobody wanted to look at him, let alone speak to him. They all kept shuffling away and refusing to make eye contact.

He watched Sukea stare after the third frightened granny to herd her grandchildren away from him. His expression was lost, a flicker of something Obito thought might be *hurt* in his eyes.

Obito felt frustration rise in his chest.

Sukea hadn't even *done* anything to deserve that attitude.

He'd just seen the old lady struggling to carry her toddler grandchild and grocers while also shooing the older two grandkids back towards their home. Sukea had walked up to her and offered to help carry something, like the sack of potatoes dangling from the hand clutching her grandbaby.

How had she repaid him for this random offer of kindness? The woman had gone *white*, dropped her groceries, and done her level best to sprint away from him while dragging the older two grandkids behind her.

Sukea was too kind and too thoughtful to deserve a reaction like that—and Obito knew it was entirely the fault of the trafficking ring.

The villagers didn't know for sure what the mayor was doing, but they did know that there was a steady stream of pretty people who would show up at the mayor's house, looking frightened, and then vanish to never be seen again.

There were only so many times the villagers could see the same "mercenaries" guarding these visitors on their way to and from the mayor's house before the villagers linked the frightened people to these rugged mercenaries.

The villagers uniformly reacted with fear and avoidance.

None of them would have talked to Tobi, not with Smoker Lungs and Sword-wrangler hovering over his shoulders, but Obito didn't need to speak with them to hear the hearth-side rumors.

*The mayor is doing something to those pretty people.*

*The mayor likes pretty people.*

*Pretty people go missing around the mayor.*

*Don't be too pretty, too cute, too attractive around the mayor or you might disappear.*

*And definitely don't be any of those things near the strangers who come to the mayor's house.*

*Don't even speak to them, or you might vanish in the night like the rest of them.*

Sukea was too cute, too pretty, too new to town to be trusted.

So, the townspeople didn't trust him, didn't talk to him, didn't even look at him for fear that he would be part of the nebulous evil they knew was brewing in the mayor's home.

And Sukea didn't deserve that. Sukea deserved to be welcomed with open arms and fond smiles and good faith.

Sukea came from a world where nothing bad ever happened, where cruel people were only fables, and the fact that the filth of reality was slapping him in the face like this, by sheer proximity to the wrong people, made Obito *seethe*.

Well. Obito had been putting off dealing with the slavers long enough anyway. It was time to make sure their vileness never touched Sukea. Obito had had the *perfect* idea for how to do it yesterday.

He turned away and opened a portal to Kamui, leaping through without another glance back.

If he had looked back, he would have seen how Sukea turned to look in his direction, a politely puzzled smile already forming on his face and a "Hello, Tobi!" on the tip of his tongue.

But he didn't.

He was already gone, and because he was gone, he missed seeing

Sukea's gaze flicker back and forth over the street, too quick and too sharp to be a civilian, missed the way Sukea tipped his head slightly to smell the air, seeing traces of Tobi's scent on the wind.

--

When Obito warped into the mayor's house, it was to find him having a meeting with Sword-wrangler and Smoker Lungs.

He appeared on the ceiling directly above them, far enough out of their line of sight to go unnoticed.

"Don't give me your excuses," the mayor spat at his cronies. "You *should have* drugged Sukea at dinner, but you didn't. Fine, whatever, one night won't matter in the grand scheme of things. But, you were supposed to make up for your failure and drug him at breakfast—and what did you do? *Nothing.*"

"We did, Boss!" Smoker Lungs protested. "I vividly remember dropping the powder into Sukea's tea last night *and* this morning. We even drugged his bowl of soup this morning, right before we walked in with it!"

Obito was suddenly grateful that he'd dropped more of the general antidote in Sukea's food before he'd given the tray over to Smoker Lungs.

"Then *why*," the mayor seethed, "is it that Sukea is currently wandering around outside, fully awake and aware, conversing with the villagers? They're going to know he's here. No, they *do* know he's here. Now the whole village is a witness!"

"I heard ninja are immune to poison," Sword-wrangler said, gripping his sword hilt nervously. "Sukea already admitted that he's related somehow to a ninja clan, so maybe that's why the drug won't work on him. I say we keep him away from the other product. Who knows who hired him to come here? It could be that Konoha is trying to ruin our trade, or one of our competitors—"

"Enough!" The mayor slashed a hand through the air in frustration. "Spare me your excuses and your conspiracy theories. Sukea takes his tea with a spoonful of sugar. Tonight, replace the sugar with the drug powder and we'll get him that way."

Obito wondered if they really hadn't noticed that during both meals, Sukea had brought the cup to his mouth and inhaled the fumes but

hadn't actually *drunk* any of it.

Actually, Obito was pretty sure that the leftover liquid inside Sukea's soup bowl was the tea.

"Yes, Boss," Sword-wrangler and Smoker Lungs sighed.

Obito figured this was the perfect time to interject. He straightened from his crouch on the ceiling.

"Actually," Obito said, letting his voice deepen into what he thought of as his Madara voice. "You won't be doing *anything* to Sukea."

The three traffickers jolted and looked about wildly, before the mayor thought to look up. Obito sneered at them behind his masks. *Civilians*. No shinobi worth their kunai would have taken so long to look up.

"*Tobi?!*" the mayor spluttered, looking stunned.

Sword-wrangler and Smoker Lungs looked up as well at the shout, and they grabbed at their swords when they saw him.

"I *knew* there was some ninja nonsense going on!" Sword-wrangler hissed, and *really?* Was *that* what he was focused on?

At least Obito had his priorities in order.

It was incredibly petty of him and a waste of chakra to boot, but Obito took pleasure in vanishing into Kamui, only to reappear directly in front of the mayor.

The man flinched back, and tried to retreat, only to trip and fall over his own dinner table.

Obito smiled smugly behind his mask; it served the trash *right* to be so scared.

"I should kill you for even considering harming him," Obito said. His mask did nothing to hid the sadistic glee he was feeling. "Sage knows I'm not keeping you alive for your intelligence, after all."

For a moment, Obito indulged in the fantasy of killing them. He let it wash over him, let the emotions it brought forth color his killing intent so that even Smoker Lungs, who was as thick as a brick, could tell he was savoring the idea of killing them.

His heart ached, suddenly. Obito nearly choked on the sudden surge of

righteous indignation.

Sukea belonged to a world without cruelty, and these men wanted to sully him.

Obito could kill them, would love to kill them, for even considering it, but unfortunately, he still *needed* them.

The Plan required a war, the war required a match to light the powder keg, and these men were *part of the matchstick*.

If Obito wanted to make the world into the truly peaceful world that Sukea thought he lived in, if Obito wanted to utterly *erase* the filth of the world that would sully Sukea, then Obito needed to let these men live at least a little longer.

Obito ground his teeth together and let his killing intent spike briefly, enough to see Sword-wrangler and Smoker Lungs recoil, enough to hear the mayor whimper, before he stifled it entirely.

They gasped in reflexive relief and looked even more unnerved by the sudden absence.

“You seem to have over looked an important fact about Sukea,” Obito said coldly. “*Allow me to enlighten you.*”

The day before, Obito had had a revelation.

Sukea was a journalist. His articles were read by a wide variety of people in the capital.

Obito didn’t pay a whole lot of attention to the newspapers, and couldn’t have named a single article Sukea wrote if his life depended on it.

However, Sukea’s articles were apparently popular enough that Sukea could identify which article types were best-sellers.

Ergo, it was entirely possible that Sukea was one of the better-known journalists. And if he was one of the better-known journalists, then people would *notice* when he vanished.

It was the perfect excuse not to target Sukea.

Obito shoved all three men into a genjutsu, ensuring that they “arrived” at the “natural conclusion” that such a “well known” journalist would make a *terrible* target for human trafficking. Then he

used his Sharingan to blur their memories, ensuring that they didn't remember ever *considering* targeting Sukea, nor that this entire encounter happened.

He leapt back to the ceiling and crouched again, letting awareness seep back into the three men.

They blinked and shook their heads. The mayor frowned as he moved away from the table.

"Anyway," he continued. "Do either of you have anything to say about Tobi? Anything *useful*?"

Obito's eyebrows arched. That was... not the angle he'd expected their conversation to veer in.

Smoker Lungs shrugged, hand drifting from his sword hilt to his pocket. He started to pull a cigar out but put it back at a glare from his boss.

Sword-wrangler shifted his grip on his sword, tapping a finger against the hilt nervously. "I don't *know*, boss," he admitted. "It's just strange. I'd expect Tobi to be, y'know, trying to warn Sukea away from us. Or barring that, trying to flee us and the village, since we keep leaving him unattended in the sheep pens. But as far as I can tell, he hasn't said a word about us to Sukea."

Oh. Hmm, yes, Obito supposed his behavior was rather strange from their perspective. He could easily fix that, a slight change to the genjutsu they were already under would make them think he was one of their coworkers rather than one of their slaves, but... did he *want* them to think he was one of them?

Infiltrating the slavery ring would be much easier if they thought he was one of them.

Yet—Obito's heart began to ache again. Yet, being one of them would mean partaking in their filth even more than he already was and Rin would be so *disappointed* in him if he did so, so he *couldn't*.

The mere thought of disappointing her like that made heartache throb in his chest, hard enough to make Obito double over.

No. He couldn't disappoint Rin like that.

The pain intensified.

He *couldn't*. Not when merely contemplating it sent agony spiraling through his chest.

Obito nearly gasped with pain, and his mind scrambled to find something else to think about. Anything else, to distract him from the echo of Rin's disappointment.

Rin.

Sukea.

What was Sukea doing now?

*Obito didn't know.*

He tore open a portal to Kamui and left to find out.

The ache subsided.

----

Kakashi made sure to hum at all the right times as he listened to the mayor extol the virtues of the town. He'd heard this speech the night before, but apparently the mayor felt the need to repeat himself.

"Tsutsuji is named for its massive azalea bushes," the mayor repeated. "As I'm sure you've noticed, they surround the entire town."

Sukea smiled and nodded. "Yes, I saw them earlier today," he said politely. "They were very impressive."

Kakashi pretended to sip at his tea. Really, all he did was inhale the fumes; the tea smelled appallingly floral and Kakashi had no interest in seeing if it tasted like flowers too.

"I'm thinking of getting a closer look at them tomorrow," he added. "I only saw them in passing when I first entered the town."

Goroshi smiled. That expression no longer made Kakashi's skin crawl, but he couldn't quite place what had changed. "Yes, the road into and out of the village is the only place where the azalea bushes don't grow," he said.

Nagao grumbled, "Not for lack of trying, though." He took a swig of tea like it was a bottle of cheap sake and clunked the cup down on the table.

Kakashi saw Goroshi wince while the mayor glared at Nagao for the rough treatment of his new tea set.

Nagao caught the looks on their faces and abruptly looked chastened. He reached out and awkwardly straightened the tea cup on its little saucer.

Tobi leaned over and made a grab for Sukea's cup of tea. "Sukea, are you done with your tea?" he asked loudly, breaking the awkward pause.

Kakashi didn't stop him from grabbing his cup, but he definitely gave Tobi a bemused look.

"Ah, no, I still have a little left," he said, even as Tobi peered inside.

Kakashi had no intentions of actually drinking the foul stuff, but even if he had, he wouldn't have after Tobi got his hands all over it.

Although—

Kakashi glanced down at his bowl. He still had a little udon in it, so he hadn't been able to dump his tea into the bowl yet. There was... more than a *little* tea left in his cup.

Well, if anyone asked him about it, he'd just own up to not liking floral teas. It would be rather rude, considering his hosts had fed him nothing *but* painfully floral teas, but the mere fact that Sukea had made it two whole days without saying anything should hopefully ease the social sting a little.

But Tobi didn't say anything about the amount of tea left in Sukea's cup. He just tilted his head slightly towards Sukea, that eye hole shifting just enough to tell Kakashi that he was giving Sukea an aside glance.

"Tobi likes this tea," Tobi announced instead. "Tobi is going to be a bad boy and steal Sukea's tea now." And then he promptly turned away from Sukea, preventing him from seeing Tobi's face *again*, and proceeded to loudly slurp up the entire thing.

Kakashi felt a flush explode over his face.

"Ah, Tobi," Sukea said helplessly. There was no point in trying to hide his embarrassment, so Kakashi leaned into it instead. "Isn't that... I drank out of that."



“But you didn’t drink all of it right away,” Tobi said, turning back to him. His mask was firmly pulled back over his face again, and his pout was evident in his voice.

Tobi waved the now-empty tea cup at Sukea. “If you liked it so much, why didn’t you slurp-slurp it down like Tobi did just now?”

“It was *hot*, Tobi,” Sukea said. Said, not whined, Score one for Kakashi’s self-control. “I wasn’t trying to burn my mouth. And you can’t just drink out of someone else’s cup out of the blue.”

Tobi tilted his head, birdlike. “You can’t? Why not? Tobi thought Sukea wouldn’t mind because Sukea wasn’t drinking all of it.”

Kakashi really had been caught out on his dislike of the tea, hadn’t he?

But, as fascinating as it was to know that Tobi was more observant than he let on, that still didn’t address the root cause of Kakashi’s embarrassment.

“Tobi, it’s not whether or not I wanted to drink the tea that’s the problem,” Sukea said, and fidgeted with the cuff of his coat sleeve nervously. He let his face keep its flush, ducked his shoulders a little to make himself seem less threatening—or seem like he was shrinking in on himself in embarrassment. Maybe if he seemed uncomfortable enough, Tobi would get the message.

“It’s—well, you know,” he tried.

Tobi didn’t say anything, didn’t move, didn’t in any way indicate that he knew what Sukea was getting at.

*Fuck.* Kakashi was going to have to say it, with actual *words*, wasn’t he? His face burned even hotter.

*Just think of it as helping your cover, Hatake, he told himself. You’re not **actually** embarrassed, you’re just doing a good job of keeping your cover. You’re a brilliant actor when you want to be. Come on, you can say it, just get it over with—*

“Ah, this sounds a little juvenile saying this out loud,” he mumbled. Stalling. He dropped his gaze—dangerous for a shinobi facing down an opponent of an unknown skill level. Normal for a civilian embarrassed out of his mind, though.

“It’s just that—drinking out of a glass that someone else already drank out of... isn’t that, you know... an—” he risked a glance up at Tobi. Turned even redder. Frantically dropped his gaze again. “—an indirect kiss?” he squeaked out.

*Oh thank the Sage he’d said it. He wouldn’t have to say it again. It was out there, in the open, now—fuck, it was out there, in the open.*

Kakashi had just *opened* that can of worms.

*Tobi hadn’t known, Kakashi berated himself. You could’ve awkwardly brushed it off. Now it can’t ever be unsaid. Tobi’s going to know now—*

Know what? That Kakashi found him amusing? That Kakashi found him charming? That Kakashi thought he was *cute*, and endearingly clumsy?

That Kakashi saw too much of his own hurts in him, and envied his ability to keep cheerful in the face of his loss? Envied his ability to move on and *do* something with his life, something his dead would be proud of him for doing, rather than wallowing in his own grief?

Know that Kakashi saw Obito in him, saw how Obito might have reacted if it had been Kakashi who died in that rockfall, and unsurprisingly enough, found a productive way to move forwards afterward?

How was Kakashi supposed to tell Tobi that he looked at him and thought of Obito? That yesterday, when Tobi had started crying after stabbing himself with porcelain, but still tried to cover up his pain with bluster, Kakashi had had a flashback to training with Obito?

Once, during practice, Obito and Kakashi had had a competition to see who could deflect the most shuriken away from themselves using only a single kunai. Kakashi had won, but more than his victory, he remembered Obito accidentally stabbing himself with a shuriken.

His eyes had welled up with tears, and he’d jerked his arm on instinct, as if that would dislodge the shuriken from his forearm. As soon as Rin had come over, though, he’d been smiling again. Laughing again. Pretending to be fine, like they hadn’t both seen him yanking his stupid orange goggles down to hide the glassy sheen of his eyes.

Tobi even hid his hand behind his back the same way Obito had tried to hide his arm from Rin.

That was why Kakashi had tightened his grip on Tobi's other hand—he'd known, instinctively, that if he'd let Tobi move away from him, he'd try to escape the same way Obito used to.

--

"O-oh," Tobi squeaked, and the shrillness of his voice dragged Kakashi from his thoughts.

Kakashi blinked a little, lifting his head from where he'd unconsciously ducked it into his chest, and saw Tobi carefully set Sukea's teacup down.

Then his flailing friend gently moved it away from him, back towards Kakashi, and promptly dropped his head into his hands. "Oh, no, Tobi kissed Sukea!" Tobi wailed.

Kakashi stared at him, feeling his blush flare up again. That... didn't sound like Tobi was *objecting* to indirectly kissing Kakashi. That sounded like Tobi was also embarrassed.

Like he was the same kind of called-out-on-liking-someone embarrassed.

Not offended-he-was-being-accused-of-being-intimate embarrassed (characterized by horrified recoiling), not shocked-you-even-thought-of-us-that-way embarrassed (characterized by audible disgust), nope.

Tobi was squirming in his seat, tugging at his hair, peeking out at Kakashi only to turn away again, practically reeking of giddy-embarrassed-joy.

That was—Kakashi's face burned and he looked away. That was *flustered*.

He'd learned that set of reactions from watching Obito and Minato-sensei after they said something stupid in front of their respective crushes.

Minato-sensei's version came with a lot of blushing and stuttering, often drowned out by Kushina-nee's cackles. He wouldn't drag his gaze up from his feet for at least ten minutes afterwards, and when he did, he still wouldn't meet anyone's eyes unless you literally stood right in front of him and were—as Kakashi unfortunately had been for the entire time he'd been Minato-sensei's student—short enough to fit under his chin.

Obito's version of flustered started with an outburst as Obito fully processed what he'd just done, then a brief, mortified pause would follow as he realized he'd just shouted it for all and sundry to hear. Kakashi would usually watch on, feeling second-hand embarrassment, as he visibly tried to convince himself that his blunder wasn't *that* bad.

The penultimate stage, in stark contrast to Minato-sensei's shy turtle impression, was to try and bluster past it. Pretend it didn't happen and if it did, it wasn't a big deal.

Sometimes, if Rin wasn't watching, or it turned out she hadn't heard and/or noticed (and sometimes Kakashi had a feeling that her obliviousness was a studied attempt at saving Obito some face), Obito would turn on Kakashi.

And thus would begin the deluge of denials.

Kakashi didn't even need to *do* anything, he could just stand there and watch as Obito worked himself up into a frenzy deny that anything happened. Usually the only thing that whole spiel achieved was him circling back around to admitting his liked Rin.

It was... strangely endearing, for all that it had also made a frustrated heat boil in Kakashi's chest.

Kakashi had rarely let him get to the point where he circled back around to complimenting Rin. Usually, he'd start picking fights and bully Obito into a knock-down, drag-out *brawl* that bled the tension out of both of them.

Sometimes Minato-sensei would stop them. Sometimes Rin would. Sometimes, rare times, they'd come to an exhausted stop on their own, and they'd collapse on the ground next to each other, panting for breath.

Obito would yank his goggles and hitai-ate off, shrug out of his jacket, and use the sleeve to wipe his forehead. Then he'd fold it up, always bizarrely neat, and use it as a pillow. It was only after he'd completed this odd little ritual that he'd start grumbling at Kakashi, asking him why he always had to be so rude.

He'd give Kakashi this grumpy, squinty look, jab a finger at him, and declare, "One day, you'll understand what it's like to trip over your tongue *and* your feet in front of your crush, and I'm going to be right there and *laughing* at you!"

Kakashi had always turned away and scoffed, but secretly, those ends to their fights were his favorites.

Kakashi made a point of not thinking too deeply about *why* that was. Down that path was nothing but more heartbreak.

A faint, muffled whine from Tobi's direction told Kakashi that his clumsy friend was likely beating himself up for his actions, and Kakashi was tempted to pat him on the back and tell him it was okay—comforting him would be very in-character for Sukea, after all—but Kakashi wasn't quite ready to turn and face the music yet.

He needed to stop blushing first.

Honest reactions were good for maintaining a civilian cover. They were bad for Kakashi's peace of mind, though. He liked it much better when he pretended, he didn't have any emotions at all.

So Kakashi kept his gaze away from Tobi and looked to the other dinner attendees and—oh. Oh no. That was a mistake.

They'd seen *everything*.

Nagao and Goroshi were gaping at him unattractively—very unattractively in the case of Nagao, with his tobacco-yellow teeth—while the mayor had a constipated look on his face that *immediately* reminded Kakashi of last night's dinner conversation.

As soon as Nagao and Tobi had left to wrap up Tobi's hand, the mayor had turned to Sukea and apologized.

"I am so sorry for the actions of my... servant," he'd said.

Kakashi inferred that there was going to be an expletive preceding that occupation title.

"He is, ah, not the sharpest hoe in the shed, if you get my meaning," the mayor continued. "I am fairly certain that he didn't realize he was flirting with you. Please, feel free to ignore him entirely."

Sukea had pursed his lips—a slight lapse of decorum when he should've smiled—before he managed to paste a polite but empty grin onto his face. "Oh, it's no problem," he said airily. "I find him quite charming. He really does remind me of my best friend. I'd love to get to know him better."

Which was a nice, polite, socially-acceptable way of phrasing his first thought.

*I'd fuck him.*

*He's dumb, but I'd fuck him.*

Unfortunately, that subtext was clearly apparent to the mayor, because he looked vaguely horrified.

Sukea had flushed a touch—he was a civilian, and civilians didn't repress their emotional tells nearly as well as shinobi did—and hurriedly added, "I quite like the silly ones. They make for the best friends."

The expression didn't abate. Sukea was pretty sure that the mayor had substituted 'lovers' for 'friends' when he heard that sentence.

Which was *fine*, so long as he hadn't heard Kakashi's internal monologue frantically editing his dialogue to omit sentences like, "Nobody's ever said I had good taste in men," or "I have a type and it's cheerful dumbasses wearing orange."

Still, the mayor had kept looking at him like he'd said his life goals involved fucking an alligator until Sukea had changed the subject to Tsutsuji's town history. He'd gained valuable intel from that conversation but—

The "you want to fuck *what*" expression was back now.

Kakashi kind of regretted attending this dinner.

--

Tobi's flustered response apparently also came with a "frantic deluge of denials" stage, because he popped back upright and patted Sukea's shoulder.

"Sukea," he warbled, sounding anxious and vaguely teary. "Sukea, Tobi is sorry for kissing you."

*No, don't be.*

*You didn't even kiss me properly.*

"Tobi didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. Tobi just wanted more tea. Tobi—Tobi can see now that he should've asked for more tea

instead of, of—”

*Kissing me? Indirectly, at least?*

“—doing *that* to Sukea.”

*Don't phrase it like that, now it sounds even naughtier!*

“It’s fine,” Sukea said. He sounded a little strangled and was only refraining from burying his face in his hands by sheer force of will.

His face was probably still bright red.

“No, it’s not!” Tobi wailed. “Sukea is still mad at Tobi! Sukea won’t look Tobi in the eye anymore!”

*Sukea was trying not to die of embarrassment right now, Kakashi thought helplessly.*

Tobi’s fretting really was just too cute.

Too much like Obito.

He practically knew where this was going next. They’d gotten to the “You’re mad at me” substage, now it was time for the “accidentally insulting apology.”

True to form, the next words out of Tobi’s mouth were, “Tobi understands why Sukea is mad. Tobi should never have kissed Sukea. Nobody should kiss Sukea.”

A beat.

Then, the frantic verbal backpedaling substage as Tobi realized what that sounded like. “Unless Sukea wants them to! Nobody should kiss Sukea *unless Sukea wants them to!* That’s what Tobi means!”

*No, what you mean is ‘nobody else should kiss Sukea,’* Kakashi thought, feeling completely and utterly fond.

This must have been what being hit on by Obito would’ve felt like, had Kakashi ever been so lucky as to be in Rin’s shoes in those scenarios.

But if they’d just passed the frantic verbal backpedaling, that meant that next up was—

“Tobi is sure that there are plenty of people who want to kiss Sukea!” Tobi spread his arms wide, attempting to illustrate the theoretical dozens of lovesick admirers. “Sukea is super-duper cute and kissable and nice and—and anyone with *eyes* would want to kiss Sukea. So, there must be lots of people who want to kiss Sukea! But Tobi thinks that the only people who should kiss Sukea are the people Sukea wants to kiss too. Um.”

Tobi’s hands stopped flailing and he started poking his fingertips in embarrassment. “If that makes sense? It makes sense inside Tobi’s head.”

Kakashi gave up on dignity and buried his face in his hands. His face felt so hot, he was surprised he hadn’t spontaneously combusted or else passed out from sheer embarrassment.

The compliment overcorrection substage had always made heat pool in him, but before, when Obito had complimented Rin, it had always settled in his chest and made him *angry*.

Now, it pooled in his gut and made him want to *squirm*, or hide himself away until he calmed down.

*How*, Kakashi wondered, *did Rin ever manage to listen to Obito gush about her the way Tobi was gushing about Sukea without collapsing into a mortified puddle?*

No, seriously, he wanted to know. There *had* to be a trick to it.

Well, he supposed there *had* been a trick to it. It was just that the compliment overcorrection substage was the point where Kakashi used to jump in and hit Obito. Mostly to make that sick, hot feeling in his chest go away.

Which, *fuck*, meant that Kakashi would just have to save *himself* from the compliments.

“Tobi,” Kakashi managed to sputter out. “Can you—” *stop talking about me like you think I’ve hung the moon in the sky, I’m not worthy of your regard* —“pause for a moment? This is kind of—” *going to make me have a very embarrassing reaction that I definitely don’t want to have in public* —“a lot.”

He managed to give Tobi a strained smile. Reached out and patted Tobi’s shoulder soothingly. “Why don’t we sit down and finish our food,” he suggested.



Tobi paused, then said softly, with feeling, “Sukea is so pretty when he blushes.”

Nope.

Kakashi *could not do this*.

Was it too late to drown himself in his udon?

# Tsutsuji Village Arc: 5

## Chapter Summary

In which Kakaobi flirt with each other during a flower-viewing date. Sort of.

Also, when it comes to flirting, Kakashi can dish it out, but he can't take it.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The next morning, Kakashi set out to gather resources for his plan. The client had requested the deaths of all the villagers—children and infants included—and as much as Kakashi hated the idea, he was under orders to obey.

Really, these missions he was being assigned were the *worst*.

However, when the client had hired Konoha to execute this village, they had specified that it should look like a disease. Disease was... a *little* hard to fake, at least on a village wide scale.

Any “disease-born” deaths would have to pass as wildly beyond the local doctor’s purview in order for that fabricated cause to be believed. Easy to do, when the local doctor was a quack, less so when the doctor was actually competent.

Tsutsuji might have been an out of the way village, but it was still large enough to have a decent doctor in town.

That also meant it was large enough that the “plague sweeps a small village without anyone noticing” explanation would seem implausible.

Still, the client’s request was the client’s request, and Kakashi was left to figure out a way to carry it out.

Kakashi had decided to use poison to simulate disease. It was the go-to substitute for shinobi, as they didn’t generally carry diseases on them.

That would be a health hazard for their own village, after all.

But in order to use poison, Kakashi would have to find himself a

poison.

Kakashi didn't carry poisons, didn't specialize in poisons, and frankly he detested using them. If he was going to kill, he'd rather do so with his own two hands.

Kakashi knew it was the Hatake in him, but kills always seemed better when there was blood on his hands and gore under his nails.

Whenever he contemplated using poison, he vividly recalled being a toddler, perched in his father's lap. It was one of the few memories he had of Dad from before the mission went wrong.

He'd been about two, maybe a very early three, at the time. Dad had taught him this lesson to prepare him for entering the Academy.

In his memory, Dad had tucked an arm around him and told him, "Your blades, your chakra, your teeth, and your nails can all be used to kill. A death by any of these is honorable. But where's the honor in poisoning people and sapping their strength?"

Kakashi had understood that lesson better, as he'd gotten older and started interacting with non-family members more often.

Shinobi were underhanded by nature, but even they had their moral limits.

No slavery.

No sexual exploitation of children.

Those were two of the few universally agreed-upon moral limits. Every hidden village, great and small, upheld these moral lines in the sand.

But each shinobi had their own individual lines they wouldn't cross. *Clans* had lines they wouldn't cross.

The Yamanaka did not rip apart the minds of their allies.

The Hyuuga and Uchiha did not tolerate eye thieves.

The Inuzuka did not use summoning contracts, as they considered them a way to enslave animals for shinobi benefit without truly trying to *live* alongside them. They loathed summoning contracts so much, in fact, that the clan had nearly gone to war with the then newly-founded Konoha, believing it to be a community of sapient-animal

slave traders.

Almost a third of the Shodaime's reign had been spent negotiating with them before they agreed to join the village; even then, their recruitment had very nearly been contingent upon the outlawing of summoning contracts.

One of the Hatake's clan-wide moral boundaries, on the other hand, was that kills should be up front and personal.

As Dad had said, all those years ago, "Kill if you must, but at least grant your opponent the dignity of the chance to fight back. Kill if you must, but at least have the honor to wear their lifeblood. Show the signs of their dying struggles; wear with pride the last bloody marks of their existence."

As far as the Hatake were concerned, there was no greater due to the dead than to demonstrate that their kills had been *alive* in every sense of the word.

There was a *reason* why the Hatake were traditionally frontline fighters, and Kakashi was the first of his clan to go into ANBU. Upfront fighting suited them far more than treachery and trickery and straight-up *assassination*.

But that anti-poison, anti-assassination sentiment tended to mesh badly with shinobi life. Shinobi, as every Academy student learned within the first week, weren't *samurai*. Shinobi were underhanded and clever and did whatever it took to win.

Even, at times, poisoning people who had no chance of winning even in a fair fight.

Kakashi, like his ancestors before him, detested poison.

Where was the honor in poisoning people? Where was the honor in sapping their strength?

Perhaps poison ensured that they would win. Perhaps it decreased their kills' ability to struggle. But poison meant that their opponents couldn't fight back. They took away all chances at a fair, honorable fight.

Like his ancestors before him, Kakashi loathed poison. For the same reasons, he also loathed murdering children. Poison or not, children could not fight back. They were incapable of protecting themselves

from adults.

One of his personal moral boundaries was that children shouldn't be killed.

Full stop.

They *should not* be killed.

Kakashi had taken to the battlefield at an exceptionally young age, mostly because of his genius, and he had survived at least in part *because* of that same genius.

But most of his age mates had taken to the battlefields five, six, seven years after he did, and how many of them were still alive? How many of them had lived to see Minato-sensei broker treaties with Iwa and Kiri?

No, not even to see those treaties—how many of them had lived to see the treaty with *Suna*, which was the very *first* treaty Konoha had made to end the Third Great Shinobi War?

That Obito had died at sixteen, and Rin at seventeen, was nothing short of a miracle, all things considered. Sixteen and seventeen meant that they survived more than half a decade on the battlefield.

Kakashi had spoken to Gai when the treaty with Suna was first announced, and as a result, he *knew* that half of Obito and Rin and Gai's graduating class had died within the first eighteen months of becoming genin. Even more had died in the years before the treaties were made.

All of those children, all of those promising young shinobi, *dead* because they were too young and inexperienced to go up against older opponents.

Weren't children supposed to be the future of the village? Why send them out to war, then? Why send them out to die?

When the Kyuubi had attacked, Kakashi and Gai and the others of their generation had been ordered to protect the civilians.

Minato-sensei had actually told Kakashi to do so instead of standing guard during Kushina-nee's labor. That last time he'd ever talked to Kakashi, he'd said that he wanted Kakashi to protect the future of Konoha.

And the future of Konoha, as Minato-sensei defined it, was its children.

“Protect the children of Konoha, preserve their lives, because they *are* the future of Konoha in flesh.” Those had been the last words Minato-sensei had ever said to Kakashi.

Kakashi *lived* by those words.

But once he'd begun thinking about them, he'd started to wonder. It seemed so obvious when Minato-sensei was saying it. A Konoha that didn't protect its children would eventually cease to be, if for no other reason than that there would be no children growing up to staff its ranks.

But if Kakashi could see the sense in not sending children out to die in droves, why couldn't Sandaime-sama? Why did he issue that order in the first place?

Kakashi had the inklings of an answer, but even *thinking* it was treason, so he didn't let it finish forming.

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This mission, though. This mission was *vile*.

Completing it required Kakashi to go against his own moral boundaries. It required him to poison people, to kill children, to kill children *with* poison.

ANBU missions were always bad; one reason why few people *wanted* to join it was because ANBU could and *would* require its agents to cross their lines for the sake of the village.

To be ANBU was to say, implicitly, “I love Konoha more than I love my morals. I love Konoha enough to commit atrocities in its name.”

But constantly asking ANBU agents to cross their moral boundaries was just *asking* for issues to crop up. The mental and emotional toll it took on ANBU agents was one of the biggest reasons why the turnover rate was so high.

Combat stress was a big enough issue in ANBU already without putting the agents through the perfect maelstrom of circumstances to trigger insubordination. And ANBU, with had *the* lowest recruitment rate of any division in Konoha's ranks, couldn't afford to lose its

shinobi because they got *fed up* with a slew of bad missions.

To combat this known issue, ANBU commanders and Sandaime-sama usually juggled assignments so that there was as little conflict as possible between what the mission required and the moral code of the agent carrying out the mission. If an agent was vehemently against something, they were unlikely to be assigned to do it.

Ergo, Kakashi wasn't usually assigned poisoning missions, nor was he usually assigned missions involving child murder. Rescuing children, sure, but murdering them? No. Never.

Never before now, anyway.

One of the reasons why Sandaime-sama's punishment involved running these missions was precisely for the effect it had on Kakashi. Losing the Hokage's trust and being banned from S-Rank missions didn't bother Kakashi that much.

Not outside the fact that saving his comrades made the Hokage *lose faith in him*, anyway.

But being forced to overstep his boundaries like this? The sheer discomfort and self-loathing these types of missions inspired? That was Kakashi's *real* punishment for his insubordination.

And oh, what an *effective* punishment it was.

Kakashi could practically feel his soul shriveling up when he was first assigned it, had almost wanted to *beg* not to be assigned it—and now that crunch time was upon him, he couldn't stave off the horror of his orders with the frustration of having Sandaime-sama dismiss his mission sabotage report.

If anything, it hurt worse because he'd gotten settled in Tsutsuji.

Poisoning people? Dishonorable.

Murdering children? Despicable.

Killing *Tobi*, who was like a ditzy, even clumsier version of Obito? They weren't even comrades and Kakashi felt like he was *worse than trash* just *thinking* about it.

Being an ANBU agent meant throwing away his moral compass and carving out his heart every time he donned the mask. Being a Konoha

ANBU meant loving Konoha enough to commit atrocities in its name.

Still, Kakashi couldn't help but feel like if he crossed this line, if he killed Tobi, it'd destroy something in him. Break him, the way losing Obito and Rin and Minato-sensei and Kushina-nee had broken him before. Except maybe this time, Kakashi wouldn't be able to glue himself back together.

He'd have to carve out his heart to even cross this line, after all. And once his heart was gone, would he care enough about life to keep on living?

*I love Konoha enough to commit atrocities in its name*, Kakashi thought morbidly. *I just don't know if I love it enough to come back alive.*

A dog barked somewhere off to the side, and Kakashi's gaze flickered to it, assessing. He quickly dismissed it as a threat; it was just barking at him because he was passing by its territory.

It was such a cute puppy, though. It looked like a beagle with ears the color of dark chocolate and smaller-than-normal white marks.

It was also a little large for its kind—Sukea tilted his head slightly, considering, then smiled. On a second look, the dog was rather darkly colored for a beagle, probably a mutt with some chocolate lab in him, if Kakashi had to guess.

He was *very* cute. Pity he would bite, given that body language, if Kakashi tried to approach him and give him some pets.

"Hello, puppy," Sukea cooed, because there were people in the field with the dog and it would be strange if Sukea didn't comment on the cute dog. "Aren't you a cutie?"

The dog growled a little louder, before howling at him again.

"Aww, such a good guard dog," Sukea gushed. "Who's a good boy, hmm? Who's a good boy? Is it you? I bet it's you, isn't it? Aren't you the goodest boy ever?"

The wind shifted, bringing Tobi's scent to Sukea, and he braced himself just in time for his friend to bounce to a halt next to him.

Immediately, Tobi latched onto Sukea's elbow and protested, "No fair! Tobi's the goodest boy, Sukea! You said so earlier!"



A little relieved that Tobi hadn't run into him, Sukea turned and gave Tobi a soft smile.

"Tobi," he said fondly, and felt his smile warm into something a tad too genuine as Tobi tugged at his jacket petulantly with the hand not clinging to Sukea's elbow.

"Did you escape from your sheep pen again?" he teased. The mayor had made a point of telling Tobi to go back to his sheep pen and do his job after breakfast.

Tobi sighed, loud and melodramatic. "Tobi was watching the sheep, but the sheep were so *boring*! And they don't need to go anywhere for the next couple hours—*hours*, Sukea, isn't that *horrible*—so Tobi has nothing to *do*."

His back, set in an exaggerated slump, suddenly straightened, and Tobi happily used his grasp on Sukea's elbow to spin Sukea around to face him.

Kakashi let himself stumble, since a civilian would be unbalanced by the sudden movement. He was prepared to catch himself before he fell, but as it turned out, he didn't need to. Before he could catch himself, Tobi's other arm came up behind Sukea's back, right hand cupping his hip.

Sukea blinked up at him, startled.

"So, since Tobi has nothing to do, Tobi decided to come visit Sukea instead!" Tobi cheered. "Tobi thinks the sheep will be okay without Tobi watching them."

He didn't move away then. Instead, Tobi leaned in close and said, very mischievously, "Look, Sukea! Tobi is dipping you, like in one of those fancy city dances!"

Sukea blinked again, then glanced down at them. He considered their positions for a moment, then gently freed his elbow from Tobi's grasp, only to intertwine their fingers.

Sukea beamed up at Tobi. "There! *Now* you're dipping me!"

He winked, then pretended to swoon. Just to really sell the motion, he kicked a foot straight up off the ground, bent the other knee, and rested his free hand on his forehead.

Tobi laughed as Sukea tipped back melodramatically in his arms. Tobi's laughter was infectious, and it sparked an uncontrollable giggle fit in Kakashi.

After a moment, he had to put both his feet back on the ground to stabilize himself; though Tobi showed no signs of dropping him, Kakashi was probably going to giggle himself out of his hold sooner rather than later.

His free hand came up to grasp Tobi's shirt, and Kakashi leaned in against Tobi, burying his face in his friend's chest in a desperate attempt to hide his own face before Tobi got an eyeful of his dog teeth.

Sukea was just getting his breath back when a thought occurred to him, and he straightened back up again. "Oh, wait, Tobi," he said breathlessly. "Don't move."

Tobi tilted his head curiously but didn't move away.

Earlier, Kakashi had gone flower-picking. He didn't usually keep any poisons on him, due to his dislike of poison, so he'd needed to procure some somehow.

Luckily, Tsutsuji's namesake flower grew all over the town, and azaleas were *extremely* toxic. It wouldn't take much to kill someone, though given the amount of people Kakashi was planning on murdering, it was probably best to gather as many flowers as possible.

Of course, picking one bush clean would make the true cause of death unmistakable, even to civilians, so Kakashi had only taken a few flowers from each bush he'd passed.

Most of these blossoms had been hidden away already, since Kakashi didn't want people knowing he'd picked the poisonous flowers.

He plucked one out from its hiding place now, and carefully tucked it into the fold of Tobi's shirt collar. Then he gave Tobi a shy smile. "There you go, Tobi. Now you look like one of those dapper gentlemen in the Daimyo's court, with your flower lapel."

His smile turned a little mischievous, flashing the barest hint of a too-sharp canine. "I've heard flower lapels are all the rage nowadays in the capital."

Tobi's breath caught audibly in his throat, and he didn't say anything

for a moment.

The pause went on long enough that Sukea's smile faltered, and he said, uncertainly, "Tobi? Are you okay?"

Tobi shook himself a little, then said, "Ah, yes, I'm—uh, Tobi is fine. Tobi is very fine! Tobi is very flattered! Sukea, do you really think Tobi looks all, um, what was the word you used—all dashing? And handsome?"

Sukea hummed a little. Tobi was really quite adorable when he was all flustered like this.

"Yes," he reassured, "I do think you're very handsome."

Tobi gave a nervous laugh. "But you can't see any of Tobi," he said. "Tobi is—not pretty, under his mask. That's one reason why Tobi decided to wear a mask like his friend. Tobi is very, *very* not pretty, Sukea."

Kakashi couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at that.

He loosened his grip on Tobi's shirt and smoothed out the fabric. Then he pressed his palm flat on the pectoral muscle underneath.

Kakashi dragged his hand down slowly, deliberately, feeling up the hard planes of muscle under Tobi's clothes and not bothering to hide it.

Sukea smiled again up at Tobi, perfectly sweet and innocent—an amusing contrast to his actions.

Tobi appeared to be choking on his own tongue right now.

"I don't know, Tobi," Sukea said softly. "I can't see any of you, but I can feel you. And I quite like what I'm feeling."

A strangled wheeze was the only answer he got.

Kakashi beamed at him, angelic. *Take **that**, he internally crowed. Vengeance has been had for embarrassing me last night.*

Kakashi generously let Tobi have a few more seconds to recover while he basked in the smug glee he felt at getting one over Tobi. It felt a bit like the victory glow of one-upping Gai in a challenge, and a bit like the affectionate peace of those end-of-fight conversations with Obito.

Perhaps it was because this was a combination of the two events, but the afterglow was even better than anticipated. Kakashi hadn't realized he'd enjoy it so much—this must be why Genma enjoyed flirting with people.

The excitement of flirting with someone he liked and having that intent be both noticed and reciprocated was *amazing*.

He basked in the glow for a moment longer, then took pity on Tobi.

*Never let it be said that I can't be a graceful winner in both love and war,* he thought cheerily.

Out loud, he said, "Tobi, I was in the middle of taking a walk around the village. Would you like to join me?"

"Like a date?!" Tobi squeaked. He then cleared his throat, and said, clearly trying for suave, "Sure, Sukea. I'd love to join you on your walk. Which way would you like to go?"

Sukea smiled brightly, ducked out of Tobi's embrace, and used their joined hands to tug him along the road. "Over this way," he said. "I noticed yesterday that the azalea bushes along the road in and out of the village were bright red, but the ones closer to the mayor's house were pink. I've been trying to see all the color variants."

Tobi followed without protest. "Oh, they're all different colors?" he parroted. "Tobi didn't know that! Tobi thought they were all the same color."

Sukea hummed a little, the first bars of Kushina-nee's favorite Uzushio ballad vibrating in his throat, before he answered. "Yes, I nearly didn't notice," he enthused.

*And the only reason I did was because I have Obito's Sharingan active,* Kakashi added to himself.

He was quietly grateful for the dojutsu-grade contact lenses he was using. They were one of the disguise products sold in Konoha, made especially for Uchiha and Hyuuga who needed a chakra-less disguise.

The lenses allowed them to use their dojutsu without giving them away—which was, admittedly, more useful for the Sharingan as the only indicator it was active was the change in eye color. A colored contact lens wasn't going to hide the bulging veins of an active Byakugan.

Still, the Hyuuga found it useful since it gave them the illusion of colored irises and dark pupils. The Yamanaka also used these lenses for the fake pupils.

“The difference between flower colors is very minute in some cases,” Sukea continued without missing a beat. “If I hadn’t been looking closely at them, I never would have noticed.”

Not that Kakashi had been looking all that closely at the *flowers*. He’d been picking them, but the color didn’t matter all that much to him.

No, he’d been paying close attention to the village around him. Verifying the information the mayor had inadvertently given him was the secondary objective of his walk.

So far, it was all correct.

That boded well for his plan.

Still, Kakashi felt unease creep through him. He snuck a glance at Tobi.

If he wanted to make his self-imposed deadline and return to Konoha on time, Kakashi would need to kill everyone that night.

Everyone included Tobi.

Kakashi didn’t *want* to kill Tobi.

Unconsciously, he squeezed Tobi’s hand, and was startled out of his thoughts when Tobi squeezed back.

“What were you humming earlier?” Tobi asked.

“Humming?” Sukea echoed, puzzled.

“Yeah, you know...” Tobi trailed off and mimicked the noise.

Sukea blinked, a little surprised by the perfect mimicry of the ballad he’d started humming earlier. Tobi had an impressive memory, considering he’d only heard it once.

“Oh, that’s just one of those Uzushio ballads,” Sukea said peaceably. There was no reason to hide it; there were articles about it in civilian libraries.

He’d run into articles about this very topic while rifling through one

of the libraries in the capital about a year ago.

Technically, Kakashi's mission had been over already and he should have been on his way back to Konoha. But the mission had gone astonishingly well, considering the amount of moving parts Kakashi had had to navigate, and Kakashi figured that he was owed some leisure time as a reward.

He'd also figured that the Hokage could wait a few more hours on his report while he went looking for new reading material.

It's not like anyone who *wasn't* named Kakashi would know.

Kakashi had gone digging through the new foreign article exposé section first, since those articles were both the easiest to speed read and the most likely to be censored, assuming they ever made it to Konoha's library.

A mention of Uzushio had caught his attention. The article in question had been titled "Songs of the Sea: A Compilation of the Music of Uzushio-gakure." It had been compiled by a historian interested in recovering some of the ballads that had been lost with Uzushio.

The brief author's note at the beginning had mentioned that it was still an incomplete record, but the author had chosen to release it early, to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of Uzushio's destruction.

"One of those Uzushio ballads?" Tobi echoed. Even though Kakashi couldn't see his face, he could vividly picture the puzzled frown Tobi was wearing.

"Mmhmm," Sukea said. "I read a fascinating article a while back about the lost music of Uzushio. It inspired me to go looking for people who could play some of the songs mentioned. I ended up taking a vacation to the Land of Waves."

He turned a cheerful smile on Tobi. "Did you know that there's a lot of overlap between music in the Land of Waves and the Land of Whirlpools? Wave is a very small, narrow country that survives on sea trade, and it absorbed a lot from the countries that use its ports. As such, a lot of its musical and cultural cues come from its neighboring nations. Wave is one of the few places that plays music Uzushio-style. Another place might be Water Country, since it sits on the other side of Whirlpool's borders."

“...oh, that’s very cool,” Tobi said after a split-second pause. Then he gently tugged on Sukea’s hand, forcing Kakashi to stop and face him. “But Sukea,” Tobi said urgently. “You should be careful. Tobi has heard that there are sharks and other scary things in Water Country. What if you go looking for music and get attacked by an angry kraken? Tobi doesn’t want Sukea to get eaten by a giant squid!”

“Tobi,” Sukea started to say.

“And people!” Tobi flailed his free hand wildly. “Tobi has heard horror stories about pretty people in Water. They sing and sing and you want to go into their water to hear them clearer, and then they drown you. Tobi doesn’t want Sukea to be drowned by a siren either!”

Sukea couldn’t suppress an amused smile at that.

*Tobi, Kakashi thought, don't you that mean you don't want me to be seduced by a siren? Don't worry, I don't plan on getting honeypotted by a Kiri nin.*

“Relax, Tobi,” Sukea said soothingly, and laid his free hand on Tobi’s arm. Tobi shifted, taking it so that he could hold both of Sukea’s hands. “Going as far as Wave was enough for me. I have no plans on visiting Water.”

He took half a step into Tobi’s personal space. Tilted his head up to look directly into the eyehole of the mask. “And if I ever meet someone from Water, I promise I’ll be very wary. I don’t think sirens are real, but, well.” Another half step closer. “It’s better to be safe than sorry, right?”

They were practically chest to chest now.

“...right,” Tobi said faintly. His voice was a little deeper now, a little more gravel in his voice. He cleared his throat roughly. “Safe’s always better than sorry.”

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Kakashi stooped down, plucking a handful of azaleas from the bush. He turned to Tobi, who was hovering over his shoulder, and smiled. “Look, Tobi,” he said and offered him the bouquet. “These ones are pink on the outer edges but white in the middle.”

Tobi squatted down next to him and peered at them. He leaned in so close to look, he nearly fell over, and he had to frantically tip himself

backwards before he fell on top of Sukea.

Sukea blinked at him, and Tobi stared back, now sprawled ungracefully on the ground.

After a beat, Tobi scrambled back upright and rubbed the back of his head. “Ah, Sukea, they look amazing!” he gushed, clearly trying to play the whole incident off. “Tobi didn’t know they could look like that!”

Sukea smiled at him, bright and honest. “I didn’t know either, until I saw these ones,” he confessed.

He held them out, expecting Tobi to take them. When his friend did so, Sukea sat down properly and pulled his backpack off. He fished around in it and pulled out a sketchbook.

Kakashi’s disguise kit contained more than a wig and some contact lenses. It contained more than a spare set of clothes or three.

Part of making a disguise was having a background for the disguise. Name, family name, if necessary, hometown, occupation—all of that was necessary for infiltration.

Kakashi preferred to stay vague for the first observation period, so he could tailor his background to match his audience’s expectations as much as possible.

With Tobi, making up the story about his mother won him some brownie points in regard to the stripes. Talking about Obito, in hindsight, allowed him to empathize with Tobi’s loss—and empathizing with someone made them feel more comfortable with him. It made them trust him more, having seen a vulnerable side to him, and that in turn subtly encouraged them to give Kakashi valuable intel.

In Tobi’s case, that valuable intel was that he had met Rin.

But all that aside—Kakashi would be a fool if he just expected to wing his backgrounds ever time. If he tried to pass himself off as a gardener, he had *better* know enough about plants to hold up to an in-depth discussion. Similarly, if he planned on passing himself off as an artist, he should have the requisite supplies.

Sukea was supposed to be a journalist.



Kakashi had made a show out of sitting down to write an article last night after dinner, since it would be a bit strange if the journalist never wrote anything.

In the morning, however, Kakashi had decided to go “get pictures” of the azalea bushes to help “enhance his article.” The cheapest art supplies he’d found in Konoha had been a sketchbook and some ink, so that’s what he used.

Anyone who’d seen him crouched by the azalea bushes this morning had also seen him “drawing” pictures of Tsutsuji’s bushes.

Now, however, Sukea turned a sweet smile on Tobi and said, “Tobi, would you mind posing with the flowers? I’m going to try drawing them, and I’d loke to get you in the picture.”

“Sukea is an artist too?” Tobi sounded impressed.

Sukea smiled sheepishly. “An amateur one, yes,” he admitted. “I’m not the best one out there, but my attempts are passable enough.”

*I’m better at drawing maps and copying things from memory,* Kakashi added internally.

Tobi rocked a little on his heels, squirming into a position that reminded Kakashi hilariously of Gai’s Good Guy pose. “Tobi is ready, Sukea!” he chirped.

Sukea giggled a little—really, Tobi’s pose was too funny—before flipping his sketchbook open.

His laughter faded as he immersed himself in replicating what he saw. As usual, the soft, natural lines of the petals did not agree with him. They came off as too jagged, like he’d drawn childish lightning bolts all over the place.

Give him a grid or a blueprint any day; sharp, crisp angles were much preferable than the gentle curves.

Drawing Tobi was even worse—Kakashi could not for the *life* of him get his body to look right. There wasn’t enough depth, and he looked flat and two-dimensional. The mask was comically large on the figure, the hands looked like mittens with sticks poking out, and the less said of what Kakashi had done to drawing-Tobi’s legs, the better.

He didn’t realize he was frowning until Tobi said, softly, “Sukea? Are

you okay? You look really frustrated.”

Kakashi blinked and looked up again. He felt his brow smooth out, and the relief from the release of tension surprised him.

Tobi leaned over to look at Kakashi’s drawing.

Kakashi felt a hot flush of shame run through him, and he inched the sketchbook away from Tobi.

It really was hideous. It hardly looked like him.

“I guess I can’t really call myself an amateur artist,” Sukea said lightly, trying to play the whole thing off. “I think a two-year-old could do better.”

“No, no, it’s good,” Tobi reassured him.

“It’s really not, Tobi.”

“It is!” Tobi insisted. “But,” he reached out and gently took the brush from Kakashi’s hand. “Tobi thinks it might be easier to do a rough sketch with a pencil, rather than a calligraphy brush.”

Kakashi stared at him. “But it’s horrible,” he protested. “I completely failed at drawing you.”

Tobi shrugged. “You can always try again, if you really want to,” he said. “But Tobi still thinks it might be easier to do in pencil before you put ink on. Ink can’t be erased. Pencil can.”

Kakashi hesitated, still feeling inadequate. “It doesn’t look right,” he said slowly. “I hate to give up on it if it’s not perfect.” He dropped his gaze to the sketch and felt frustration well up again.

“Perfect?”

“What I made doesn’t match what I have in my head,” Sukea said. “I keep trying to improve, but this is one skill I just can’t seem to get better at. I guess I’m just not as good of an artist as I’d like to think of myself as.”

Admitting that felt like defeat.

“Hey, don’t say that,” Tobi scolded. He leaned over and clapped a hand on Sukea’s shoulder.

Sukea's head jerked up and he looked at Tobi.

"Nobody expects the first try to be perfect. That's why it's called a *rough* draft, not the masterpiece. And," Tobi shrugged a little, suddenly seeming awkward.

"If the way you're going at the problem doesn't work... If you can't improve things by working with the preexisting framework... Tobi is a big fan of thinking outside the box, you know. If you can't achieve your goal because you *can't* improve through that method, just change your method." Tobi set the calligraphy brush down and gently tugged the sketchbook away from Kakashi's unresisting hands.

"Uh," Sukea said. "And how would I go about doing that? Everyone always says to keep at it. Keep trying until it works, no matter how frustrating it is in the short term. Practice makes perfect, and all that."

"Well, if Sukea's goal is to make the art look just like it is in Sukea's head, wouldn't a picture work better?" Tobi suggested.

"I... *am* making pictures, though?" Sukea said and gestured at his sketchbook. "Not well, obviously, but these are still pictures. They're not writing, that's for sure."

"No, I mean a *picture* picture." Tobi waved the bouquet expressively, before leaning in close. "Sukea, have you ever tried photography?"

"...oh," Sukea said.

Tobi nodded, understanding. "Yeah! It doesn't matter if Sukea has trouble drawing pictures if Sukea's method of getting his picture doesn't involve drawing. Sukea's not failing at drawing if there's no drawing involved to begin with, right? So you don't have to feel bad, Sukea!" Tobi puffed up and waved the bouquet again. "And that way Sukea can have colored pictures for his articles instead of boring old black-and-white drawings. It's a win-win! Isn't Tobi so smart?"

He preened for a moment, smug.

Kakashi stared at him, feeling strangely surprised by what should have been the *obvious* solution.

Then Sukea leaned forward and grabbed Tobi's free hand. "Ah, Tobi, thank you so much!" he chirped. "That would actually solve my problem *and* make my articles look nicer. Really, you're the best."

Tobi stuttered, caught off guard. Then he brightened and pulled Sukea into a hug. “You’re welcome, Sukea!” Tobi said. “Tobi is glad to help Sukea.”

Kakashi leaned into the hug, smiling into Tobi’s shoulder, for a moment longer. Then he pulled back. “You did help a lot, Tobi,” he said warmly. “I feel much better now. You’re—” he thought back to a few days before, and cracked a grin at Tobi.

“Tobi is the *best boy ever*,” he praised.

Tobi’s shoulders twitched and he burst into laughter.

“Tobi—” he wheezed, “—Tobi is!” A loud, snort interrupted him, before he giggled out, “Tobi is the *goodest boy ever!*”

He flapped the bouquet at Sukea, sending pollen everywhere. “Sukea needs to warn Tobi first though! Otherwise, Tobi is going to choke on his laughter, and then where will Sukea be? Sukea will be a *bad boy*, making Tobi choke like that!”

Kakashi leaned away from the pollen. “Okay, okay, I wouldn’t want that,” he teased. “I’ll be more careful. Oh, but Tobi? Be careful with that pollen. Azalea pollen, like the rest of the plant, is very toxic. We might get sick if we breathe that in.”

Tobi’s shoulders were still shaking as he set the flowers down. “Okay,” he hiccupped. “Tobi will be careful. Unlike Sukea, Tobi is a *good boy*.”

Kakashi’s eyes crinkled as he bit back a wider grin. “Oh, yes, unlike me,” he agreed solemnly. “I’m such a bad influence. I might—gasp!—make Tobi laugh himself to death. Oh, what a heinous crime! How dare I?”

Tobi burst into a fresh round of laughter.

----

That night, Obito found himself resetting the traps around Sukea’s bedroom. He loitered in the hallway afterwards, giving Sukea the space to finish changing for bed.

He supposed he didn’t really need to reset the traps. Smoker Lungs and Sword-wrangler had been dealt with already, so there was no need. No threat of kidnapping or enslavement.

No *Sukea*.

Obito drummed his fingers on his thighs rather than give into the urge to pout.

At dinner, Sukea had revealed that he would have to move on the next morning. Work still called, as much as he enjoyed his little stay in Tsutsuji.

Obito *supposed* it was the safer choice if Sukea wasn't anywhere near Tsutsuji and the trafficking ring.

Really, in the long run, he was better off.

It was just... Obito wanted to spend more time with Sukea.

Just because Sukea was Rin's relative, of course. Her relative, who she would've loved had she ever met him. Her relative, who was the perfect example of what she would've been like, had she been born a civilian.

Obito not wanting to say goodbye to Sukea had nothing at all to do with the fact that Sukea had made Obito laugh harder than he had since Kannabi.

It had nothing to do with the way Sukea had tucked himself into Obito's chest when Obito had pretended to dip him. Nothing at all to do with how slight he'd felt, tucked up against Obito's side, laughing so hard his whole body swayed like a willow frond in the wind.

It had nothing to do with the way Sukea had looked when Obito had suggested photography, like he was having a revelation. The way that all of Sukea's confused frustration had faded away in favor of the kind of awe that made Obito feel warm and bubbly inside.

Really. Obito was just clinging onto what remnants of Rin he could. That was the only reason why he was sulking over Sukea's impending departure.

...Obito had probably waited outside long enough. Sukea should be changed for bed by now.

But when Obito opened a Kamui portal to see what Sukea was doing, he was stunned to see that Sukea's room was empty. He blinked at it, bewildered, before a flicker of motion caught his eye.

Sukea's window swung shut soundlessly.

Obito immediately moved to follow. The Kamui portal in Sukea's bedroom closed and one reopened on the roof overlooking Sukea's bedroom.

Obito watched as Sukea slipped through the mayor's garden. He paused for a moment, plucking a flower from its branch and tucking it into his pocket.

Was Sukea just collecting flowers at night?

Maybe he was planning on writing a segment about how nice a midnight stroll in Tsutsuji was?

*It was* a nice night to take a stroll. It wasn't too cold or too windy, and there wasn't a cloud in the sky.

It could stand to be just a tad warmer though. Sukea had decided to leave off his scarf for once, and Obito found himself fretting over whether he'd be warm enough.

Sure, Sukea still had that thick coat on, and he'd fished a pair of gloves out from somewhere, but what if his neck got cold? Sukea had said, on that very first day, that he got cold easy. That was why he kept wearing his jacket everywhere.

There had been a couple of relatively warm spring nights recently, but "relatively warm" was only in comparison to the harsh winter nights that had eased up barely a month ago.

Sukea didn't seem to be shivering though.

He ambled along the roads toward the town center, apparently perfectly content to take his time seeing the sights.

Obito carefully adjusted his portal's location every few seconds to keep track of Sukea.

The town center contained the giant well the mayor's ancestor had apparently "braved the wrath of the warring clans to build." Arrayed around it were a couple of bright red azalea bushes.

Obito watched carefully as Sukea did a circuit around the bushes, idly inspecting them, before he ducked through the gap between them and strode up to the well.

He reached over and began tugging on the pulley. Obito had... absolutely no idea what Sukea wanted with the well at midnight.

Seeing the flowers, sure.

Taking a stroll and pausing to admire the well, that was a little strange but still okay.

Reeling up the well bucket? Obito had no earthly *clue* what Sukea was doing.

He watched, baffled, as Sukea continued reeling the bucket up.

It was going to take him a while—that well was deep to begin with and had only gotten deeper over the years—so Obito settled in to wait and see what Sukea would do next.

As he did so, he couldn't help but notice that Sukea looked *really* cute. The moonlight gleamed off the distracted purse of his lips. They were spit-slick and reddened; Sukea kept nibbling on his bottom line as he reeled the bucket in.

Speaking of... Obito's gaze trailed down the line of Sukea's back, and he suppressed a wistful sigh.

That shapeless coat his Sukea's body—which had been amusing when Smoker Lungs had been sighing after the “pretty lady” down the road. It wasn't now, when Obito knew Sukea's back muscles were working hard to pull that bucket up, but he couldn't *see* it happen.

The sound of rushing water made Obito's gaze jerk up guiltily from where it had been slowly drifting further downwards.

It took him a moment to shake himself out of the fantasy of watching Sukea's muscles flex and return to reality. What he saw did not clarify anything for him.

He stared, utterly bewildered, as Sukea shook the bucket, dumping out the last of the water in it.

After he'd emptied it entirely, Sukea set the bucket down on the lip of the well. Then he reached into his coat pocket and withdrew a small flask.

Sukea shook his sleeves back carefully, exposing a dark shirt sleeve under his jacket, and inspected his gloves carefully. After that was

done, he unscrewed the flask and carefully ran a finger through the contents. A strange reddish paste covered his finger when he withdrew it.

Obito watched as Sukea then wiped the paste off on the inside wall of the bucket. He repeated this a couple more times before Obito moved his portal to get a better look at what he was doing.

The new angle didn't make the purpose of Sukea's actions any clearer, but it did tell Obito that there were pink streaks in the paste.

He watched for a moment longer, before the color nagged at him.

Hesitant, he stuck his head through the portal and inhaled carefully. He didn't have Kakashi's acute sense of smell, and the town in general smelled pretty floral, but... somehow, he got the impression that the floral scent was a little *too* crisp. Like the difference between sun-warmed grass smell and freshly-cut grass smell.

Or, in this case, the difference between flowers on the vine and crushed flowers.

Something hot and rancid and *ugly* dropped like a stone in Obito's stomach.

He stared, horrified, as the dots connected.

Flowers. Red flowers, red and pink and pink-with-a-white-core flowers.

That was azalea paste Sukea was rubbing on the bucket.

And hadn't Sukea told him earlier that day that azaleas were toxic?

*If—* Obito began to hyperventilate, and he jerked back into Kamui and paced. *If Sukea rubbed that paste onto every part of that bucket, and the people drank from that bucket... wouldn't that kill everyone who drank from that bucket?*

But the whole village drank from that bucket. The mayor had said it himself, it was the only well in the whole village.

*The mayor had said it himself.*

Obito froze.

Suddenly, he remembered Sukea's strange fascination with that news.



How he'd spent the last two mornings wandering the streets of the village, watching the fields as much as the people. How he'd brazenly picked flowers earlier that morning, despite telling Tobi that their pollen was a contact poison.

How he'd *known* that they were a poison to begin with.

Obito's hands fisted, and he turned and punched one of Kamui's columns. The strange material it was made of didn't even crack despite the force he'd put into it.

He'd dismissed the possibility of Sukea being a Konoha nin early on. Sukea had been so clear about his childhood, it seemed impossible that he *could* be a shinobi.

A Nohara, yes, it was clear that he was a Nohara, but a shinobi? No. No way in hell.

But Obito had forgotten, once again, that this world *was* hell.

He let out a bitter laugh.

He'd been a *fool*.

A fool so eager to believe the lie, he'd never once thought to question the details.

Sukea's strength, Sukea's extra bandages, Sukea pretending to drink the drugged tea—Obito had brushed all of that off entirely.

He'd wanted Sukea to be a peaceful, happy reflection of Rin so badly he'd overlooked *everything*.

But it was all a lie.

The whole time, Obito was just *deluding* himself.

Sukea wasn't a reflection of Rin as she should be in Infinite Tsukuyomi.

Sukea was a shinobi.

Sukea was a Konoha nin.

It seemed his original assumption was right after all. Nohara Sukea was just some lucky relative of Rin's that hadn't been in either the compound or in Konoha itself during the Kyuubi Attack.

And now, here Sukea was, spending time with the man who murdered his clan. Here Sukea was, flirting with Obito.

Here Sukea was, poisoning the well.

Obito's eye narrowed.

Children drank from that well.

Rin would *hate* child murder.

Rage boiled in Obito's chest, and the sick agony of betrayal burned away.

Obito had liked Sukea because he was a living homage to Rin's memory.

He cared about him because Rin would have cared about her illegitimate cousin, and Obito cared about the things Rin cared about.

But Sukea was going to murder children while wearing Rin's face.

That didn't make him someone Rin would have cared about.

That made him an insult to Rin's memory.

And Obito *killed* insults to Rin's memory.

## Chapter End Notes

\*Side eyes the 'Strangers to friends to enemies speedrun' and 'Sukea the thinly veiled metaphor for Infinite Tsukuyomi' tags.\*  
Yeaaaahhh, those are about to come into play now.

Also, this is--no joke!--a double update! And there's a little extra in the endnote ch. 6

# Tsutsuji Village Arc: 6

## Chapter Summary

Confrontations ensue, and the Tsutsuji Village Arc comes to a close.

## Chapter Notes

Got this chapter out super quick because this was what I was writing instead of chapter 4.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

One moment Kakashi was alone, almost finished poisoning the bucket that the whole village drinks from, and the next a tidal wave of killing intent slammed into him.

Kakashi shivered on reflex, and the ripple of his shoulders riding up was put to a halt when his shoulder bumped into something.

Into *someone*.

Someone who was pressed up right behind him now, chin hooked over Kakashi's shoulder, hips to his hips, chest crowded against his spine.

Kakashi barely had time to register the familiar orange mask before Tobi whispered right into his ear, in a strangely deep voice, "What do you think you're doing?"

Kakashi didn't think.

He slammed his head back abruptly and saw stars as he headbutted Tobi.

It did the trick, though.

Tobi flinched back, startled, giving Kakashi enough leverage to hook his foot around Tobi's and foul his footing. Kakashi leaned his weight back, shoulder checking his opponent, and they tumbled to the ground.

Somehow, Kakashi landed on the grass instead of Tobi's stomach, and he could've sworn Tobi went through him as the other man rolled to his feet and snatched a kunai from somewhere.

Tobi lunged to stab Kakashi, but Kakashi sent a pulse of chakra through the storage seals embroidered on his coat cuffs and got his own kunai up in time to block the hit. Their kunai clashed, skittering off each other, and Kakashi used the motion to force the other shinobi's arm wide.

He brought his feet up to his chest, kicking at Tobi's chest, but the blow went through Tobi, as though he were empty air.

Kakashi's eyes went wide, but he didn't let shock slow him down. Instead, he got his forearms under him and threw himself forward, using the momentum from his kick—and as Tobi brought his arm back around, Kakashi flipped *through* Tobi's body and landed back-to-back with his opponent.

For a split second, Kakashi considered spinning around and kicking Tobi's feet out from under him again, but he dismissed the idea just as quickly as it formed.

Trying to grapple with someone who was apparently selectively intangible was a terrible idea that had already failed once. What Kakashi needed was space to figure out an attack plan.

So, instead of staying in place, Kakashi sprinted several paces away.

A burst of heat at his back told him that he was right to get out of the way instead of staying inside Tobi's guard. He risked a glance over his left shoulder, saw a full-fledged Fire Dragon bearing down on him, and leapt to the side to avoid its jaws.

It rolled in the air, and Kakashi twisted to avoid one of the blazing coils of its body. A flash of dull orange in his periphery was the only warning he got before Tobi was back in his face.

Kakashi tried to slam his kunai into the single eyehole available, and an ugly snarl ripped out of Tobi's throat as it went through him.

Kakashi's left eye ached, and he blinked irritably. The Sharingan saw clearly even in the depths of night, lit by sporadic bursts of flame, but Kakashi's own eye didn't. The uneven lighting between the two eyes was beginning to give Kakashi a headache.

A thought niggled at him. He gave it a moment to percolate as he said, deliberately sweet, deliberately taunting, "Ah, Tobi. And here I just thought you wanted to go flower picking with me. I didn't know you wanted a moonlit waltz too!"

Instead of tripping over his feet, flushing adorably the way he would have a few hours earlier, Tobi just growled again. “I can’t believe you,” he seethed. “I thought you were a *good* person, a *kind* person, but instead you’re just *trash*! Filth just like the rest of this wretched world!”

Kakashi tried to stab his kidney again, felt his arm phase through Tobi, and ducked down to slam his shoulder into Tobi’s side. The sudden body tackle seemed to startle Tobi, who apparently wasn’t expecting Kakashi to try and tackle him after the last attempt failed.

Kakashi blinked again, feeling a headache throb lowly behind his eyes.

The thought connected.

Obito’s eye.

Obito’s Mangekyo.

--

Several months prior, shortly after Tenzo, Shisui, and Itachi had passed their initiation tests and had been formally inducted into ANBU, Kakashi had decided to do his own skills assessment.

An important part of forming any team was knowing what your teammates’ skill sets were. It was hard to effectively combine skills and leverage individual talents and specialties when those were unknown.

So, Kakashi decided to pull Shisui and Itachi aside and start going over their skill sets. He would have pulled Tenzo as well, just to make sure that all members of Kakashi’s future ANBU team were on the same page about their skills, but his kouhai were currently serving his time on the Hokage’s guard.

There was only so much that the paper file could tell him about his teammates’ skills, and it was always better to see them work in person. That was precisely why the tests were done—but Kakashi had been out on a mission during their initiation tests, and therefore hadn’t seen their performance. The only one he knew through personal experience was up to ANBU code was Tenzo, mostly as a side effect of having fought him back when Tenzo was still ROOT.

Technically, Kakashi was supposed to be on medical leave right now, catching up on sleep while he recovered from a broken leg, but there

was no way Kakashi was going to waste time doing that when he could be getting to know his squad instead.

Most of what Shisui and Itachi told him matched their files, so their skill sets didn't come as a surprise. The next step was to test their skills, but, well.

Kakashi wasn't *quite* ready to face down the wrath of ANBU's head medic that he would incur if he sparred with them himself. So, instead, he had them spar with each other.

The sole exception to that was Itachi's genjutsu mastery, which Kakashi had Itachi test on him instead. Genjutsu was an art that could only be judged when one was under its influence.

Kakashi had no way of judging time accurately while under Itachi's genjutsu—it seemed to him that he'd broken all of it relatively swiftly, but the change in the sun's position told him that it had been much longer. He stared at the sky, then turned to Itachi with one eyebrow raised.

He twitched immediately, because Itachi was suddenly right in front of him.

"Captain," Itachi greeted politely, staying still while Kakashi recovered from his near heart attack. "The final layer of the genjutsu was a time dilation," he explained, "which makes time seem to pass slower than it actually does. I broke it for you, just now."

Kakashi blinked, startled, then his gaze turned considering. "That is very impressive," he said. "The effect was very subtle. I didn't notice at all until you appeared in front of me."

Itachi dipped his head slightly, pleased.

"How long was I in there?" Kakashi asked, referring to the genjutsu.

"About three and a half hours," Shisui said cheerfully, approaching. His lips were red, and he looked rather ruffled. "I wanted to draw on your face, or try to unmask you, but Ita-chan stopped me, the party pooper."

"Somehow, I doubt that you were truly disappointed by his distraction," Kakashi said blandly, and let his gaze deliberately drift to a red mark barely visible by Itachi's collar.

Itachi looked down at it, flushed, and hurriedly straightened his shirt.

Shisui's eyes went wide, and he said, "Uh, wait—"

Kakashi waved off whatever he was going to say. "Maa, it's fine. Teenagers will be teenagers. Just don't let it affect your work, okay? Horny ANBY make out sessions are only good if you're *trying* to be blackmailed into doing the undesirable milk runs."

Their shoulders slumped in relief.

Kakashi smiled at them. "Contrary to popular opinion, the only anti-fraternization policy in ANBU bans relationships between commanders and their subordinates," he reassured them. "You're of equal ranking; there won't be any repercussions for being together."

Shisui dragged a hand through his curls. "There's no repercussions on the ANBU side of things," he corrected. "But I think our clan elders might have a heart attack if they found out we're dating. They're... really dead set on me passing down Kotoamatsukami."

Kakashi gave him a bemused look. He didn't know what that was—a jutsu, maybe? If so, it could easily be taught to others.

But he supposed it wasn't really his place to go poking his nose into another clan's politics. Doing so with the Uchiha, when he still carried Obito's eye and they still carried a grudge, was an especially stupid idea.

He let it go.

"Are there any other skills you have that you think might be useful in the field? Either of you?" he asked instead.

Shisui and Itachi traded uncomfortable looks.

It was mildly fascinating to watch their silent conversation—Shisui would gesture with his hands or his body, Itachi would make a *very* minute twitch back at him, and Shisui's face would contort into a new position. Then the cycle would start all over again.

Kakashi raised an eyebrow at them. "Is there a problem?"

Shisui blew a stray curl out of his face and ambled a little closer. Itachi turned back to Kakashi.

"Uh, yes? But also, officially, no?" Shisui said. He winced. "It's

complicated and you definitely can't write it down anywhere because we are *technically* breaking clan law by telling you about it."

Both of Kakashi's eyebrows raised, though they could only see the one. "...okay," he said slowly. "If you're going to get in trouble for telling me—"

Itachi shook his head. "Nobody has to know we told you," Itachi said quietly. "But it's probably for the best if we tell you now. That way, if you ever see Shisui use it, you know not to make eye contact until he's done talking."

Kakashi had absolutely no idea what they were talking about, so he supposed it was a good thing they were going to explain. He waved a hand at them. "Go on."

"I have Kotoamatsukami," Shisui blurted out.

This meant absolutely nothing to Kakashi, and he said as much.

"It's, uh, okay, it's kind of like a genjutsu? Except not really? If I give someone a command while looking them in the eyes, then they have to obey that command forever. It's basically eye-contact-based brainwashing." Shisui waved his hands around to emphasize.

"...it's what," Kakashi said flatly. He held up a hand. "No, start from the beginning. Small words. Pretend I'm a particularly dumb genin."

That earned him a laugh. Shisui's shoulders relaxed.

Good.

"So, and this is the big clan secret thing that we're not supposed to talk about, so keep mum," Shisui said. "The Sharingan has a stage of evolution beyond the three tomoe. It's called the Mangekyo. When it forms, it creates an...um, I guess you could call it irregular?" He glanced at Itachi, who tilted his head to one side before nodding slightly.

Shisui turned back to Kakashi. "Yeah, an irregular pattern. Like, it's not one of the regular tomoe patterns—I don't think I've ever seen a Mangekyo with tomoe patterns, but I'm also not the clan heir and therefore don't get to take sneak peeks at the Mangekyo records. Itachi would know better than me." He waved a hand at Itachi almost absently. "The Mangekyo comes with a weird ability, and mine is Kotoamatsukami. Which I already described to you."



Kakashi frowned a little. “But I’ve seen your Sharingan and it’s very distinctly a tomoe pattern?”

“The Mangekyo,” Itachi interjected, “can be activated and deactivated at will, much like the Sharingan. But activating the Sharingan does not necessarily mean the Mangekyo is active. It takes conscious effort for a Mangekyo user to activate their Mangekyo, even when they already have their Sharingan active.”

Shisui nodded along.

Kakashi hummed in thought. “And I assume that it has different activation conditions than the regular Sharingan?” he asked almost absently.

“Activation conditions?” Itachi parroted.

“Like,” Kakashi waved a hand, “different conditions than the ones for gaining a tomoe.”

“Oh,” Shisui’s easy smile fell off for a moment, and he grimaced. “Uh, yeah. The Mangekyo is awakened when you get someone precious to you killed. In my case that was—my genin teammate.”

Kakashi blinked. Shisui had been part of Kushina-nee’s genin team. Both Shisui and Megumi were still alive, so the only one that Shisui could be referring to was—

“Akari committed suicide,” he said slowly.

Then, because he’d been hearing this basically since Minato-sensei found him kneeling in a pool of his father’s blood, and even more so after Rin died, he added, “Her suicide wasn’t your fault.”

Shisui huffed. “Glass houses, Captain,” he said. “You’re not in any position to be throwing stones.”

Kakashi pursed his lips.

Shisui shrugged. “I tried to talk her down,” he said. “She wouldn’t listen. I know that she didn’t want to live anymore—that even if I’d shunshined her directly to the hospital, she wouldn’t have healed unless she fought to live and she pretty clearly wouldn’t have—but that doesn’t change the fact that I couldn’t help her, and I just watched her die.”

His smile was sad and sardonic. "Half the reason I focused so much on speed afterwards was because I kept thinking that if I'd been faster, I could've prevented her injury. Barring that, if I'd been faster, I could've gotten her back to Konoha before her injury got so bad, she gave up on life."

Itachi took half a step closer to Shisui and tugged at one of his arms. When Shisui uncrossed them, Itachi ducked under it and cuddled into his side. "She had already given up on life," Itachi said quietly. "You and Megumi didn't want to see it, but I could. She gave up on life after the Kyuubi Attack, and that injury was just the tipping point."

Shisui squeezed his boyfriend almost automatically before dropping his arm from Itachi's rib cage to his hips. He leaned a little on Itachi, expression clearly fond. "Mm, try telling that to my nightmares," he said.

Kakashi let them have their moment. A thought was starting to bother him.

"So what *does* a Mangekyo look like?" Kakashi asked. "Since apparently it doesn't have tomoe."

Shisui blinked, looking a little startled. "Uh, well, mine is a shuriken," he said. "...did you want to see it?"

At Kakashi's nod, Shisui disentangled himself from his boyfriend and stepped forward. His eyes changed, going from night-black to Sharingan red. Then the tomoe twisted, blending together to form into a solid black shuriken. Kakashi leaned forwards a little to get a better look.

After a moment, he leaned back, and Shisui let his Sharingan deactivate.

"Huh," Kakashi said, thoughtfully. The idea from before nagged at him even worse.

He distinctly remembered that prior to Rin's death, Obito's eye had two tomoe. After Rin's death, it had three. Therefore, he knew that his transplanted Sharingan was still capable of evolving.

Then, if the Mangekyo was just an evolved form of the Sharingan, and he knew for a fact that Rin's death had caused Obito's eye to evolve in some way, didn't that mean there was the possibility of Obito's eye evolving into a Mangekyo?

“Theoretically,” Kakashi asked, already grimacing from the discussion topic, “could I have developed the Mangekyo? From Rin’s death?”

“Uh,” Shisui said. “That’s an Itachi question. He’s the clan heir; he’s trained to answer questions on clan law and record minutiae.”

Itachi frowned a little. “I...don’t think transplanted Sharingan are capable of evolving past the form they were in when they were transplanted.” A slight pause, before he added, “Although, to be fair, there aren’t many cases of successful transplants to begin with. Frankly, Captain, you’re somewhat of an outlier, being capable of using a transplanted Sharingan.”

Kakashi pursed his lips behind his mask. “Define evolved,” he said tersely. “Does that include gaining tomoe?”

Both Uchiha paused, visibly confused.

“Yes?” Shisui said and glanced at Itachi for confirmation. “I mean, unless clan record disagrees, I don’t think transplants are supposed to gain more tomoe. You can’t even turn the transplant off so I would assume that you can’t handle the chakra usage upgrade that comes with a new tomoe.”

Itachi nodded. “There are only a handful of cases where a non-Uchiha survived the transplant,” he explained. “Normally, their immune systems reject the transplanted eye, and the rejection kills them. Organ rejection, as I’m sure you’re aware, is always a concern when doing a transplant.”

Kakashi nodded. He remembered Rin worrying about that the whole way back to Konoha. When they’d gotten back, the medics at the hospital had been very surprised that Kakashi’s body *hadn’t* rejected Obito’s eye, considering the circumstances of the transplant.

Itachi continued, “If that doesn’t happen, then they usually die of chakra exhaustion either during the transplant or shortly thereafter. If they survive long enough for a new tomoe to form, their bodies either die of chakra exhaustion during tomoe formation, or the evolution causes their immune systems to reject the organ. So, to answer your question, transplants can form new tomoe, and they often do so safely in Uchiha hosts. In a non-Uchiha, like yourself, new tomoe formation has happened before, but it’s always fatal to the non-Uchiha.”

He gestured idly with one hand. “Which is why most bloodline thieves tend to go for a fully matured Sharingan,” Itachi said. “There’s less

chance of it killing them later if they don't have to worry about the stolen eye developing a new tomoe."

Kakashi frowned. "But Obito's eye developed its third tomoe after it was transplanted," he pointed out, "and I *know* I'm not dead."

They both stared at him, wide-eyed.

"What?!" Shisui yelped even as Itachi demanded. "Show us."

Kakashi obediently lifted his headband, allowing them to see. "You didn't know?" he asked.

"No," Shisui said, stunned. "The last time I saw Obito's eye was when you first returned with it. I haven't seen it since then."

Itachi shook his own head, Sharingan flashing like he was trying to verify that what he was seeing was real and not a genjutsu. "I've never seen Obito's Sharingan," he said. "Obito didn't have it when I last saw him, and I was never included in the post-transplant interrogations, when you had to show it to us. I've also never seen you without either your headband or the ANBU mask identity seal covering the eye."

Shisui glanced at Itachi. "I was with Kushina-sensei and Yondaime-sama when Captain and his teammate reported back to Yondaime-sama about Obito's death and the eye transplant. When they first got back, it had two tomoe." He blew a curl out of his face. "I distinctly remember being surprised that Obito had two tomoe on activation. Captain's eye has three now, though, so he must have gained another tomoe."

Kakashi pulled his headband down to conserve chakra. "Obito had two tomoe on activation," he confirmed, "but after...after Rin died, his eye had three tomoe. Minato-sensei told me as much when I awoke in Konoha's hospital."

Kakashi paused, thinking back to that conversation. "He found us lying amidst the corpses of the Kiri nin that had kidnapped Rin. He could tell Rin was dead, but he checked my pulse to see if I was too. When he discovered that I was still alive, he checked my pupils and to see if Obito's eye was still there. That was when he discovered the third tomoe."

Itachi's brow furrowed. "But you survived gaining a third tomoe," he said slowly, clearly trying to reconcile this information with what he knew.

Kakashi nodded. "I did," he said, and left it unsaid that a part of him had died with Rin. "But I figured that since Obito's eye was still capable of that much evolution, then it only made sense if it was able to form a Mangekyo. Especially since I seemed to have...met...the activation conditions."

Shisui threw him a sympathetic look. "Well, if you did, and you survived it, then that makes you a regular old medical miracle, Captain," he joked, trying to inject some levity into the conversation. When neither Itachi nor Kakashi looked impressed, he moved on. "It sounds like you should have a Mangekyo to me."

He turned to Itachi. "Anything contradictory on the clan record side of things, babe?"

Itachi twisted a strand of hair around his index finger before flicking it back over his shoulder, his version of a shrug. "Every clan record I've read suggests this is impossible. Since it evidently *isn't* impossible, I see no reason why Captain wouldn't have developed a Mangekyo."

He straightened slightly, brow smoothing out. "Captain, I don't suppose you would like to do some experimenting, would you?"

Kakashi smiled wryly. "I wouldn't have asked if I wasn't. How would I go about activating it?"

Itachi shifted his gaze to Shisui, who tossed an arm around his shoulders and leaned into his boyfriend again.

"Well," Shisui said, "I just shove a lot of chakra towards my eyes. Takes about half again as much chakra as activating the Sharingan does. But I don't know how that's going to work for you, since you can't shut yours off."

Kakashi grimaced. "It's probably best not to try and use chakra usage as a measurement until I've actually activated it," he said dryly. "Is there any change in eyesight? I know that the Sharingan activating makes your vision clearer. Should I expect any similar change to mark the Mangekyo's activation?"

"Nope," Shisui said cheerfully. "It just starts eating up more chakra, and other people get to tell you your eyes changed."

Kakashi sighed. "Great. Well, here goes nothing." He reached up and pulled his headband up again. Immediately, the drain from his Sharingan worsened, and he began forcing more chakra into the eye.

After a moment, he felt it start draining at a much higher rate than before.

At the same time, both Shisui and Itachi gasped, and he knew the Mangekyo must have activated.

“Oh!” Shisui said, and he fished out a scrap of paper and a pen. Kakashi spotted a half-finished tic-tac-toe game on it. “Captain, don’t turn that off yet, just—hang on a moment. I’m going to record the pattern. Don’t blink.”

Kakashi tried very hard not to blink. “Record the pattern?”

“Mmhmm,” Shisui said absently, scribbling on the paper. Then he held it up. “Here, look at this!”

Kakashi ignored the three other complete games of tic-tac-toe games on the paper. Aside from those, there was a drawing of a bunny and a strange swirl. “Nice bunny rabbit,” Kakashi said dryly.

“What?” Shisui said, baffled.

Itachi blinked quickly in a way that said he was either laughing or was to blame for the bunny drawing. “Not the rabbit drawing,” he said. “Look at the other one.”

Kakashi hummed.

“Oh, yeah. It’s definitely not that.” Shisui agreed.

Kakashi looked again at the swirl. It looked like a spinning pinwheel, like one of the ones kids got at festivals and which turned when they waved it through the air.

Kakashi had absolutely no idea why Shisui had drawn this.

“And that’s supposed to be...?” he trailed off meaningfully.

“Your Mangekyo pattern!” Shisui said excitedly.

Kakashi blinked slowly at him. “And that means?”

Shisui’s excited smile faded slowly. “Uh, it’s the shape you Mangekyo takes on?”

Kakashi looked at him, then at Itachi, expecting the clan heir to clear up whatever Shisui was talking about.

Itachi, unfortunately, just nodded to agree with Shisui. “That is the pattern your Mangekyo has.” He seemed as confused by Kakashi’s reaction as Shisui was.

All three of them stared at each other blankly for a moment. Kakashi lowered his headband again and cut the chakra flow before he passed out.

Finally, Kakashi gestured to the picture. “So that’s what shape my eye takes on when it’s in Mangekyo form,” he clarified.

At their nods, Kakashi spoke slowly, putting the pieces together as he talked. “And...it’s the shape of *my* Mangekyo specifically?”

Another nod.

Kakashi frowned. “But it’s not the same pattern as Shisui’s Mangekyo,” he pointed out, confused.

The Sharingan, as far as he understood it, always looked the same no matter whose eye it was originally. It was either the deactivated coal black, the red with one tomoe, red with two tomoe, or red with three tomoe. When he’d discovered there was an additional pattern, he’d naturally assumed that his Mangekyo Sharingan would look like Shisui’s.

His squad mates clearly followed his train of thought, because understanding crossed their faces.

Shisui shook his head. “Everybody has their own unique Mangekyo pattern,” he explained. “Which is why the pattern is recorded for tracking purposes. Like I said earlier, mine is the four-pointed shuriken.”

Itachi nodded. “Mother’s is the five-petal orchid and Father has the triple whirlpool. Madara’s pattern was the inverted tomoe cycle, and Izuna’s was the expanding sun disk. Legend has it that when Madara stole Izuna’s eyes, his Mangekyo pattern changed to incorporate both patterns.”

“And I have...what?” Kakashi asked bemused. “It looks like those little pinwheels you get at festivals, the ones you see kids waving around.”

Shisui shrugged. “The person who owns the Mangekyo gets to name it when they enter the pattern into clan record. If you want to call it pinwheel-in-motion, then we can name it that.”

He glanced over at his boyfriend, frowning. "Is he going to be allowed to record it though? Actually, should we even record it? Technically, Captain's not even supposed to know the Mangekyo exists. How are we supposed to explain him even knowing *how* to activate the Mangekyo in the first place?"

Itachi hummed a little in thought. "Clan record exists to ensure that if bloodline theft ever occurs, and we later recover the eye, we can identify who it came from," he said thoughtfully. "If Obito's eye is ever stolen, and subsequently recovered—"

Kakashi winced at the mere thought of it and put his hand over Obito's eye protectively.

"—then having a record of what the Mangekyo pattern is would make it easier to determine whose it is. So, yes, we should record the pattern. But I doubt Captain will be allowed to record it himself. You and I will have to update the records for him."

He paused, then turned to Kakashi. "Before we do so, we should figure out what your Mangekyo's skill is."

Kakashi blinked. "That's...also different from Shisui's?" he asked, before another thought occurred to him. "Does every Mangekyo have its own unique ability?"

"Uh, yeah, Kotoamatsukami is pretty rare as far as Mangekyo abilities go," Shisui said. "There's only a handful of Mangekyo abilities out there—it's not like there's an infinite variety to match the infinite number of Mangekyo patterns. The Mangekyo abilities are Kamui, Izanagi, Kotoamatsukami, Amaterasu, Tsukuyomi and Susanoo, listed in order from rarest to most common."

Shisui rocked a little on his heels and cleared his throat before continuing. "Some of the super ancient clan lore says there used to be a seventh Mangekyo ability called Kojin, which healed, but that hasn't manifested since around the fourth or fifth decade of the Warring Clans Era."

"Kamui should probably be marked extinct as well," Itachi said. "The last recorded user predated Konoha's founding by over a century and a half. The next rarest is Izanagi and it currently has four users living, one of whom is Father. I don't believe there has ever been a time where there has *not* been someone with Izanagi in the clan."

Kakashi stared at them blankly. "I hope you realize I have absolutely



no idea what any of those names mean.”

“Yeah, we should’ve expected that,” Shisui said cheerfully. He clapped his hands. “There’s only one way to find out which one you’ve got, so! Hurry up and pop a soldier pill, Captain, and we’ll see what trick you’ve got up your sleeve. Or under your headband, rather.”

Taking a soldier pill turned out to be a good idea. Using the Mangekyo nearly made Kakashi swoon from sheer chakra exhaustion in the same instant it presumably activated.

But nothing appeared to have happened.

Shisui and Itachi had given him a brief overview of the different Mangekyo abilities. Both Kotoamatsukami and Tsukuyomi worked on people, so targeting one of them was ideal, but there was always the off chance that Amaterasu manifested. Just to avoid any accidents, they’d had him target one of Shisui’s Kage Bunshin instead.

Gaining the memories of being roasted alive by black flames wouldn’t be fun, but it was still better than dying in agony.

But there weren’t any flames or a giant rib cage, which eliminated Susanoo and Amaterasu. Kakashi, as far as he could tell, wasn’t weaving a genjutsu of any kind, and when he gave an experimental order, nothing happened.

After a bemused shrug and a “It’s probably Izanagi then,” Shisui went to poke his clone to dispel it.

They were all very surprised when his hand went right through it.

Shisui reeled back in shock. “What the fu—” he started to say, but Itachi cut him off with an alarmed “Captain!”

If Itachi said anything else after that, Kakashi had no memory of it, because the chakra exhaustion caught up to him at that moment and he collapsed.

--

Kakashi woke up to find his very excited kouhai hanging out by his sickbed. When they noticed he was awake, Shisui leaned over to shake him excitedly. “Go~od morning, Captain!” he said in a voice that was far too cheerful for what felt like the ass crack of dawn.

“Hmfrgh,” Kakashi mumbled.

“Guess who has a totally unknown Mangekyo!” Shisui winked and shot him finger guns. Kakashi had the uncharitable urge to bite his fingers.

Itachi reached over and set a gentle hand on Shisui’s shoulders. “Shisui,” he chided.

Shisui made a face back at him. “Yes, yes, don’t yell so loud so early in the morning,” he droned. Then he rolled his eyes.

Exasperated, Itachi yanked hard on his shoulder and shoved his boyfriend back into his seat. He then, very pointedly, turned his back on Shisui.

“Captain,” Itachi said peacefully, as if that entire exchange hadn’t happened, and offered Kakashi a cup of water. “It’s good to see you awake again. Shisui and I checked the clan records while you were out. We took the liberty of recording Obito’s Mangekyo manifestation while we were there. However, we could not find intangibility on the list of the Mangekyo’s recorded abilities. If and when you recover, we would like to experiment more, but for the time being, please focus on your recovery.”

He paused. “Also, Sandaime-sama has expressed his disappointment that your medical leave has once again been extended due to your recklessness with your health.”

*Translation, Kakashi thought, he wanted to send me out again but I’ve thwarted him with my chakra exhaustion. And I need to stop giving myself chakra exhaustion or he’ll consider my inability to **stop** pushing myself beyond my limits further evidence that my judgement cannot be trusted.*

“If I recover?” Kakashi asked aloud. “I wasn’t aware that my chakra exhaustion was so severe as to warrant an *if*.”

“Oh, it’s not the chakra exhaustion you need to worry about,” a menacing voice said, and Kakashi blanched even as Sparrow stalked over to him. “It’s *me*.”

The green sparrow mask tilted down, leaving the eye holes to glower down at Kakashi. Even knowing that the identity seal prevented him from seeing Sparrow’s eyes didn’t stop Kakashi from seeing the evil gleam in them.

She jabbed a finger into his chest. Kakashi was deeply alarmed to see it was one of her specialty claw sets, which looked like elongated nails but were actually hollow and loaded with poison. Sparrow was infamous within ANBU for injecting people with toxins while clawing them up.

Or injecting them with paralytics and dragging her unfortunate patients to the infirmary. It was one reason why the ANBU head medic was the most unquestionably terrifying member of the entire ANBU corps.

“If you extend your medical leave *one more time*,” Sparrow snarled, “because you couldn’t take it easy *like I ordered you to*, then *so help me*, I won’t even treat you. I’ll just march myself over to Hokage-sama and suggest that you be retired directly to the shinobi reserves. *Do I make myself clear?*”

“Yes, ma’am,” Kakashi said meekly, eye wide with fear.

Sparrow stared at him silently for a moment, then nodded sharply. “Good,” she said brusquely. She turned to Shisui and Itachi. “Make sure your idiot of a captain sticks to his bedrest this time, or ANBU is going to end up with a couple of eunuchs in its ranks.”

Shisui flinched and nodded frantically, while Itachi went *still* in that way that said he was suppressing a shudder.

Seeming pleased by their reactions, Sparrow turned and strode out of the room.

They watched her go, and as soon as she was gone, Shisui whined. “She scares me so much,” he confessed.

Itachi looked solemn. “I see why they say that the medics are the most feared of any nin.”

Shisui reached out, hooked a hand around Itachi’s waist, and pulled his boyfriend into his lap. Itachi didn’t fight the motion, just dropped willingly into Shisui’s arms and got comfortable.

“Sorry, Captain,” Shisui said, turning towards Kakashi. He crooked his jaw over Itachi’s shoulder, absently linking his hands over his boyfriend’s stomach. “I don’t think we’re going to do any experimenting for a long while.”

Kakashi twisted around, ducking a scything kick from Tobi and hopping neatly over a burning branch.

He turned his idea over in his mind, considering it. Obito's Mangekyo, name pending, made things intangible for a brief period of time.

Kakashi could only use a solid object to hit a solid object. Trying to hit an intangible object with a solid object was an exercise in futility. But, if, say for instance, the object he was using was also intangible...could it make contact with another intangible object?

The idea was nearly madness.

Kakashi had no way of knowing how Tobi was making himself intangible. It could've been a seal, for all he knew. There was no guarantee that if Kakashi made his kunai intangible it would be able to hit Tobi.

And if Kakashi used the Mangekyo, then he'd burn all his chakra reserves. If he was wrong, he wouldn't be able to use any jutsu, and that was an entire chunk of his arsenal out. Worse, he'd be on the verge of chakra exhaustion—definitely not a position to be in against an opponent of this caliber.

But did he have any other choice?

A glance past Tobi told Kakashi his fears were correct: the Fire Dragon had made contact with the azalea bushes that dotted the town center. Nearly half the town center was up in flames, and already, some of the nearby building had caught fire too. Soon the entire village would be aflame.

Every part of azaleas was poisonous, from the sap to the leaves to the roots. Kakashi had no desire to find out if their smoke was too.

He would balk at breathing that in, even *with* his masks on. But right now, he was Sukea, barefaced, without even a scarf to protect him. He'd sealed that away before sneaking out, since he didn't want to give any ROOT nin the opportunity to strangle him with it if they appeared mid-mission *again*.

There was no way Tobi was going to let him escape and get away from that smoke. They were too close to the fire, to the potentially poisonous smoke, to *not* be breathing it in.

Kakashi had to end this as swiftly as possible. And he didn't have the

*time* to figure out a way around Tobi's intangibility.

Grimly resigned, he yanked one poison proof glove off and threw it at Tobi. The masked man didn't even bother dodging it, but that was fine. It was nothing more than a precaution. Kakashi had been handling azalea paste with that on. He didn't want it anywhere near his mouth as he unsealed his case of soldier pills and dry swallowed one.

He barely waited for the surge in chakra to hit before he began channeling chakra to Obito's eye.

Tobi had apparently caught sight of Kakashi eating a soldier pill, because he was suddenly *right there* in Kakashi's face.

*Good.*

Kakashi brought his kunai up and stabbed at Tobi's gut even as he glared at his weapon, willing it to become intangible.

Just as it began to slip through his fingers, it buried itself in Tobi's gut, and the man made a choked noise of pain.

Kakashi paid for it almost immediately, as Tobi's hand whipped around and cracked cross his solar plexus. He gasped in pain, thrown back into the ground by the force of the blow.

It took him a second to gather his wits again, vision already going fuzzy with chakra exhaustion.

When he looked up, Tobi had one hand raised from hitting Kakashi, and the other...the other was clutched to his side, where Kakashi's kunai was buried in his guts.

The man turned to stare at Kakashi. The killing intent, having receded just the slightest bit in his shock, suddenly redoubled.

"Now," he said, voice even lower, even colder than it had been the previous times he'd spoken, "how did you manage that?"

Kakashi tried to get to his feet, but something snared his legs and yanked, grounding him. Startled, he looked down, and was stunned to see roots growing out of the earth and pinning his legs.

*Was that...Mokuton?!*

Gritting his teeth, Kakashi didn't even bother trying to yank his feet

free of the encroaching roots. It never worked with Tenzo; it was best not to assume that it would with Tobi. Instead, he brought his hands together and performed a quick Kawarimi, substituting with the well bucket.

To hell with his previous plan. This mission had been a colossal fuck up from start to finish; the news that there was another Mokuton user out there, one who could also make himself intangible at will, would have to suffice.

Kakashi rematerialized in the well, and managed to attach a foot to the side of the well before he could fall. Then he went to attach the other foot, and his vision went gray.

*Oh, he thought vaguely. I don't have the chakra for that.*

The last thing he saw was the sky falling away as he came free of the well wall.

## Chapter End Notes

Since the Tsutsuji Village Arc has come to an end, I decided to do a little analysis/author commentary of the little things I was thinking of as I wrote this. It's got some worldbuilding notes in it, so check it out if you want to know a little more about this fic!

<https://www.tumblr.com/shefrommo/713437009542365184/tsutsuji-village-arc-analysis?source=share>

# Reunions Arc: 1

## Chapter Summary

In which masks are removed, and Obito discovers that when push comes to shove, he really *can't* hate his teammate.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

As soon as the smoke cleared and Obito saw the well bucket, he knew exactly where Sukea had disappeared to.

He vanished into Kamui, sparing half a second to yank the kunai out of his side and drop it, before he leapt out into the well. As soon as he entered it, he anchored himself to the wall.

It took him a moment to spot Sukea, and when he did, he had to stare in stupefied shock.

*Was Sukea just **falling** down the well? He wasn't even **trying** to save himself?*

After a moment, Obito shook himself and realized, incredulously, that the first person to *ever* hit him while he was intangible was actually... unconscious. Of all things.

*What the fuck.*

Obito followed him down, and hooked an arm around his waist. They vanished into Kamui a split second before they would have hit the water.

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Obito glowered down at Sukea, trying to figure out how he'd managed to actually hit him.

Three possibilities came to mind: seals, jutsu, or a bloodline ability akin to Kamui.

A quick scan of Sukea's kunai—and where had *that* come from? Sukea's coat was baggy, sure, but it wasn't baggy enough to hide an entire kunai up his sleeve—had not yielded any engravings.

The kunai had its fair share of nicks in the blade, as was normal for an older, well-used kunai, but the only major marking it had was the blacksmith's mark on the hilt. Konoha standard, as expected.

But no engravings. No seals.

So, however Sukea had managed to hit Obito through Kamui, it wasn't with the assistance of a seal.

That was good. The only seal Obito knew how to dismantle was a jinchuuriki seal.

Madara's tutelage had been... *illuminating* in many ways.

Ways that were very useful for Madara's intended purpose, but generally not useful whatsoever in any other situation.

But if it wasn't a seal that allowed Sukea to hit Obito while he was using Kamui, then it had to be something else.

A bloodline, maybe?

But the Nohara didn't *have* a bloodline.

(Blessed *forests*, if the Nohara clan had had a bloodline that made them temporarily intangible...

Rin would still be alive.

That last, devastating blow wouldn't have ever landed.

*Gods*, what Obito wouldn't *give* for that to have been the case.)

Obito pursed his lips and reached down. He was careful to avoid skin contact with the remaining poison-proof glove as he worked it off Sukea's hand.

Azalea poisoning would be a vicious way to die, and he felt a renewed surge of anger at the thought that Sukea had intended to put an entire town through that agony.

Still, he didn't let that distract him from his purpose: figuring out how Sukea managed to hit him.

And before he could sort *that* out, he needed to make sure that his new hostage was properly disarmed.



He stripped off Sukea's coat, looking for the kunai pouches or hidden pockets or wherever it was that Sukea was hiding his weapons. To his bewilderment, he didn't find any.

He held up Sukea's shapeless coat and stared at it. No weapon pouches magically appeared before his eye.

Obito scowled at the offending jacket and shook it, as if that would make something fall out. When nothing did, he stuck his arm up the sleeve, trying to feel along the inner seams for a slip of a pocket.

As he neared the cuff, his fingers encountered a strange, rough line. Then another. And another.

Obito straightened the cuffs and peered at them closely. It took a bit of head tilting to see, but eventually he was able to make out thin lines of embroidery on the cuffs. Embroidery in thread nearly the same shade of brown as the jacket, and in the shape of a storage seal.

Obito's eye widened. "So that's how you did that," he realized. "The whole time, you've had your weapons literally up your sleeves, in a storage seal conveniently stitched into your coat."

Suddenly, Sukea's reluctance to take the coat off, even indoors, made *far* more sense.

"How clever, Sukea," he murmured, impressed despite himself. "How very, terribly clever of you. I might just have to steal your idea."

Now that he knew what to look for, Obito dragged his hands carefully over Sukea's clothing. He checked *everything*, every seam, every hem, for more storage seals. He even checked Sukea's socks.

Not that he thought Sukea would have hidden any storage seals in his socks, but he'd already underestimated Sukea enough as it was.

Better to be safe than sorry, as the old shinobi saying went.

He didn't find any more storage seals, so Sukea was now disarmed. Presumably, anyway; Obito would still be on his guard.

That just left him to answer the question of *how* Sukea had managed to hit him.

It wasn't a seal that allowed Sukea to hit him with the kunai, Obito had already figured that out. Sukea hadn't used any hand signs for

what he did—if he had, Obito would have had a Sharingan-clear memory of him doing so—so a jutsu was out of the question too.

That just left a bloodline limit as the only possibility.

And most bloodlines came with clan markings. The Yamanaka's pupil-less eyes. The Inuzuka's fang tattoos. The Aburame's hollow indents in their joints, from which their hives emerged.

Even the classic "Uchiha look" was a kind of marking, clearly defining the members of the clan as such even when they hadn't awakened their Sharingan.

That classic "Uchiha look" was the whole reason why nobody suggested Obito *wasn't* Uchiha, when he'd failed to manifest the Sharingan.

Obito didn't look much like his parents. He didn't look much like any of his grandparents, either. His jaw was too square, his body too short, his limbs too long—Grandma had always called him a brawler, not a dancer, and said he'd grow into himself soon. She'd also always said that once he had, he'd stop tripping over himself all the time.

Obito supposed she hadn't been wrong on that account. Once he'd gotten that final growth spurt and sprouted like a weed, he hadn't been so clumsy.

Still, it had stung when all his cousins, both close and distant, had been the perfectly graceful "good little Uchiha" and Obito had been—as his sixth cousin twice removed (or something like that) Takehiro had once said—"a bumbling giraffe summons poorly disguised as a Uchiha."

It hadn't helped that Uchiha had fire affinities primarily, with the occasional lightning affinity here and there. Obito was probably the first and *last* Uchiha to have a water and earth affinity instead.

Sheer tenacity and unusually-large chakra reserves had been the only reason he'd been able to fake having a fire affinity.

Grandma and his teammates were the sole people who knew that Obito *didn't* have one, and after the near-wildfire he'd started when he'd performed his Great Fireball for his coming-of-age ceremony, nobody in the clan was going to suspect otherwise.

Think he had shit chakra control? Yes.

Believe he was incapable of shaping his chakra constructs into anything more complex than an orb? Yes.

Suspect his elemental affinity *wasn't* fire to begin with? No.

All that aside, though, even the minor clans without bloodlines had some kind of clan marking. It was a point of pride for them. They had no physical markings, no “clan face,” no fancy bloodline to mark them out as one unified clan, so they turned to tattoos.

Hence, the Nohara stripes.

And if Sukea had a bloodline, chances were that he had some kind of clan markings to go along with it.

The most common place for clan markings was on the face. Sukea already had clan marks there—the Nohara marks—and no others that Obito could see. He scanned it once, twice, thrice, anyway, searching for any lesser clan marks that might have been hidden.

...His face was really pretty, though.

That was absolutely not a thought Obito should be having about an enemy.

Obito flexed a hand absently in his lap, staring at Sukea. His face was slack with sleep. Well, unconsciousness, really, but he looked like he was sleeping.

Obito had a sudden flashback to the previous night, when he'd wished to see Sukea's sleeping face. To know how he behaved when he was at peace.

Obito hesitated, then gently touched Sukea's chin. He found himself holding his breath, expecting the feather-light touch to wake Sukea.

Sukea didn't even stir.

Obito let his breath out slowly, then dragged the pad of his finger along Sukea's cheek. He lingered for a moment on the mole, strangely fascinated by it, and debated running his finger over the plump lower lip.

But that seemed a touch too intimate to bear, so Obito regretfully moved on.

His gaze caught in the slight dip in Sukea's left eyebrow, the

childhood scar he'd wanted so badly to trace earlier.

Without thinking, his finger trailed up to touch it, and a moment's whimsy had him reaching to trace along Sukea's tattoos to reach the little scar.

It should have been smooth skin.

It wasn't.

Obito's brow furrowed when his finger encountered a slight ledge, for lack of a better word, as it moved from pale skin to the purple ink. He paused, fingers drifting down and then back up again.

That... was definitely a ledge there. He shifted his angle, tried from the sides of the stripe rather than the bottom. Same result.

Obito sat back a little, halfway baffled.

That wasn't a tattoo. That was—something else.

Frowning, he moved to check the purple stripe under the right eye. It was also raised, and he began to pick at the corner of it.

He couldn't quite get a grip, so, frustrated, he pulled his gloves off and tried again. This time, he was able to get his fingernail under the corner and he peeled it back.

It came all the way off, and was tacky on the underside.

*It's some kind of tape*, Obito realized. *One of those disguise tapes they sell in the hidden villages.*

*...That shouldn't be so much of a surprise*, he thought vaguely, staring down at the fake tattoo.

Hidden villages were always coming up with new and innovative ways to improve disguises. That—despite what certain misogynistic parties thought—was the true purpose of the Kunoichi Corps.

The Kunoichi Corps had a reputation for being full of women who specialized in honeypot missions, and maybe that *was* true back when the village was new and Nakano Ume had just founded it. Nowadays, the name was just a tribute to the women who founded it.

In truth, the Kunoichi Corps was Konoha's name for what other villages called the Foreign Intelligence and Surveillance Division. The

Kunoichi Corps encapsulated Torture and Interrogation (which was, ironically enough, the most public aspect of it), but aimed it outwards.

T&I sought to extract information from individuals who were physically located inside Konoha, be they prisoners of war or traitors captured before they could flee. The Kunoichi Corps was a spy network that extracted information from anyone who wasn't physically located within Konoha.

That could be field interrogations of enemy nin, civilian gossip, meet-ups with infiltrators, anything.

Honeypots, contrary to public opinion, were the one thing the Kunoichi Corps *didn't* specialize in. No, after the Great Honeypot Debate had been resolved early in the Second Great Shinobi War, honeypot missions had become available to just about anyone in the village.

Sure, there were some restrictions to them.

The Daimyo had strict restrictions on child sexual exploitation, restrictions Konoha both agreed with and upheld, so children were banned from being assigned the mission—either as the seducer or as the target.

The missions were assigned on a volunteer basis. In order to volunteer, the shinobi had to be at least a chuunin and at least eighteen years old—and therefore above the age the Daimyo had declared the age of consent for Fire Country.

The first restriction ensured that nobody who was only *barely* a legal adult was being assigned a seduction mission whereas the second restriction ensured that no physically underage children were being assigned seduction missions.

Once those two requirements were met, a willing shinobi could add their name to the honeypot volunteer pool. The Hokage could then select a shinobi from that pool to run the honeypot mission.

The shinobi who was selected was always given the option of refusing, no questions asked, and that vicious old bat Utatane had made it *abundantly* clear that any attempt to override or censor a shinobi for refusing would result in her *personally* coming down on their heads.

Even the Sandaime flinched for fear of *that*.

Utatane Koharu was the ultimate victor in the Great Honey-pot Debate and the driving force for the Kunoichi Corps' evolution from 'Warring Clans Era temptress' into the formidable intelligence network of modern Konoha.

Part of that work had been divorcing the idea of temptress seducer from the idea of a kunoichi. Making that entire category of missions available for everyone—both male and female—to complete was one of the ways she'd sought to drive out the association.

The other way was by changing what kind of work the Kunoichi Corps did. They ran all of Konoha's intelligence, compiled all its reports into one cohesive unit, and collected and verified every scrap of mission intelligence.

Of course, the majority of their information was gained through infiltration, and infiltrators needed solid disguises.

Konoha's R&D department was fairly well-known, especially after Orochimaru's defection, and most innovations were attributed to it. But it was only responsible for refinements of jutsu, weapons smithing, clinical trials for new medical jutsu, etc.

The actual development and manufacturing of disguise equipment was the domain of the Kunoichi Corps, and virtually every disguise product in Konoha from Inuzuka-approved "civilian perfumes" to dojutsu-grade contacts were designed by them.

--

All things considered, colored tape to falsify clan marks was a fairly simple trick. Usually the inverse—skin-tone tape to hide clan marks—was used, but there was no reason why faking the clan marks *couldn't* happen.

So, it really shouldn't have been such a shock to see that Sukea's Nohara clan marks were fake.

Everything else about him had been.

Obito felt something sick and hot and *angry* crawl up his throat as he stared at the blank expanse of skin under the tape.

Carefully, far more carefully than Sukea ever deserved, he reached out and tapped Sukea's right eyelid. The purple there didn't come off; instead, it felt slightly grainy in that way that makeup always did.

*Sukea hadn't lied about that being eyeshadow*, he thought vaguely.

His jaw set and he reached for the remaining strip of tape. He wasn't careful this time as he stripped it off. Sukea's brow barely furrowed, though it must have hurt to have the tape ripped off.

But where the right strip of tape hid only blank skin, the left hid a scar. A... very *familiar* scar.

Obito stopped moving and *stared* at that scar, at the way it was deep enough and long enough that it should've destroyed the eye it bisected.

The eye that was instead *intact*, as though it was a fake, a replacement, a *transplant*. A transplant in a face that was a male version of Rin's, as though it was a relative of hers... or as though it were carefully designed to *look* like hers. Designed by someone who knew her well enough to replicate her face and who could act *just like her* and who had an *eye transplant* and—

Hardly daring to breathe, Obito reached for the chestnut curls (*barely a shade darker than Rin's*, he thought hazily) and pulled at them, slipping a hand close to the skull and lifting. The curls caught, tugged, and pins popped loose.

Obito pulled the wig away to reveal a mop of grey hair that sat flat to his captive's skull for barely a second before it sprang back up again, sending hair pins flying as it did so. Obito jerked away just in time to avoid getting hit in the eye by one of the hair pins, and he bit down a hysterical laugh as he stared down at Kakashi.

"You crazy bastard," he huffed, thumping Kakashi on the chest. Kakashi didn't so much as twitch. "You went and disguised yourself as *Rin*? And then you had the gall to go out and kill children wearing her face? She would hate you for doing that!"

But saying that brought up uncomfortable thoughts about what Rin would have to say about what Obito did in her name. Surely, *surely*, she wouldn't approve of the blood Obito had shed so far.

Not gentle, kindhearted Rin who cried when they snared rabbits for dinner, not sweet, endlessly patient Rin who never snapped at them even when Kakashi and Obito were at their worst.

Surely she'd disapprove of Obito killing people for her—of Obito killing *Minato-sensei* and *her clan* in her name.

Obito shut his eye tight against the lance of agony that cut through him at the thought of Rin's disappointment.

He rubbed his chest almost absently, and dragged a breath in. It came out ragged with pain, and Obito cast his mind about for anything to distract himself from thoughts of Rin.

He was abruptly reminded of the last time he'd seen Minato-sensei alive. Of his determination, of his bravery, of his cunning, of their fight.

Obito winced, remembering when he'd allowed the three-pronged kunai to phase through him, thinking of it, thinking it didn't *matter* because he'd won, and then Minato-sensei had reappeared behind him.

(Obito had been on Minato's genin team since he was *eight*. He should've known better.)

That was... one of the last times Obito had been truly injured. Kamui meant that Obito could count the number of physical injuries he'd sustained in the years since Rin's death on his hands, and with fingers left to spare.

Although, he now had one fewer fingers left to spare.

Dragging himself away from his thoughts, Obito peered down at his sole living teammate. "And what was that earlier, with the kunai? How'd you manage to—ah, no, never mind."

Obito carelessly tossed the wig away and leaned over Kakashi, using a finger to gently tap and lift a green contact from their shared eye.

He smiled a little, feeling strangely nostalgic. "Asshole, did you go and invent a new use for my Kamui?"

He thought back, idly remembering how Kakashi could take a technique Minato-sensei had demonstrated *once* and use it to devastating effect with half a second's thought.

Wasn't that exactly how Kakashi had invented Chidori in the first place?

Minato-sensei showed them his Rasengan once, and Kakashi—instead of oohing and awing over it like Obito and Rin had—immediately asked what happened if he added an elemental nature to it. The next



time they met for training, Kakashi had Chidori to demonstrate.

Now Obito had inadvertently shown him how to use their Kamui to make things intangible, and Kakashi, true to form, had promptly turned right back around and did the exact same thing Obito did. The only difference was that Kakashi used Kamui on his kunai instead of on his body.

“I’m surprised you can even use our Mangekyo,” Obito said thoughtfully. “I thought that just unveiling it took all of your... reserves...” Obito trailed off abruptly.

Come to think of it, Kakashi had popped a soldier pill right before using Kamui on the kunai, hadn’t he?

Obito was pretty sure his reserves had been full before he’d taken that pill so by taking one when he didn’t need one, he was just pumping more chakra into his coils than he could handle.

Doing that could cause chakra poisoning—a common side effect of soldier pill abuse. But Kakashi was too smart to risk his own health by overdosing on soldier pills—unless, of course, he didn’t *need* to handle the excess chakra because it was all leaving his system right away, spent on a single use of Kamui.

But if Kakashi’s reserves could barely survive just the unsealed Sharingan, not even a fancy Sharingan-enhanced genjutsu, then how bad would his chakra exhaustion be after using the Mangekyo?

Chakra exhaustion *killed*. That was the very *first* thing Academy students learned about chakra, before they even learned their hand signs or the Academy Three.

Suddenly, Kakashi’s uncharacteristically feeble fight, his listlessness even in the face of getting thumped on the chest, and his complete nonreaction to being monologued at didn’t seem so harmless.

Frantic, Obito shoved Kakashi’s sleeves up and felt for his tenketsu. What he felt terrified him—Kakashi’s reserves were all but gone, vanished with only the slightest wisp of chakra to indicate he even had any.

*Civilians* had more chakra than Kakashi had now.

“No,” Obito breathed. He was dimly aware of his Mangekyo spinning, etching what may very well be Kakashi’s last moments into his

memory. *"No! You don't get to leave me like this!"*

He threw himself over Kakashi's prone body, pressing his palms over Kakashi's tenketsu and funneling his own reserves down into Kakashi.

Despite how much he channeled down into Kakashi, his teammate's chakra coils remained hauntingly hollow. What felt like a flood of chakra to Obito seemed to translate into a barely-there mist for Kakashi, a mist that quickly evaporated.

Obito gritted his teeth and glared down at his eye. For the first time ever, he regretted giving it to Kakashi.

Obito was feeding so much chakra into Kakashi, the force of it should have woken him up, the same way ingesting a soldier pill could snap a chakra exhausted shinobi into back full awareness. But Obito's eye sucked up all the chakra he pumped into Kakashi, no matter fast pumped more in.

Obito couldn't do anything about the way that it all got channeled up into the eye. It was like a drain chugging water down before Kakashi's system got a chance to drink. Even if Obito upped the amount he was pouring into Kakashi, it would all flow right down the drain—ah.

*There was a thought.*

If Kakashi's chakra coils were a pipe system where the water flowed from his hands up his arms, along the coils by his spine and down the drain of his eye, then wouldn't that make Obito's hands on his tenketsu a tap? And Kakashi had more than two tenketsu points, so didn't that mean there were more taps Obito could turn on?

More taps turned on meant more water flow meant more chakra in Kakashi's system meant a higher chance of his body getting to drink its fill before Obito's eye gluttoned itself.

"Sorry, Bakakashi," Obito muttered, and yanked an arm away from Kakashi's wrist to awkwardly wrestle his shirt over his head. "Guess you're going to have to put up with me in your personal space. Yell at me when you're feeling better."

He put his hand back on Kakashi's tenketsu, resuming the flow from that hand, then pulled his other hand off and tossed his shirt off entirely. Then he started wrestling Kakashi's shirt off to match.

As soon as they were both shirtless, Obito pulled his limp teammate

into his lap, cradling him so that Kakashi's back laid against Obito's chest.

"Fuck, I'm not sure exactly where all your tenketsu points are. I'm a *Uchiha*, not a *Hyuuga*. You might have more along your chest than your back for all I know, but I know of at least two along your spine." Obito shifted, getting comfortable.

"Remember the third mission we took at an outpost along the Rice border? One of the Hyuuga, what's-his-name, Hyuuga Michio, that's it, got mad at an Akimichi and shut the tenketsu points along the poor guy's spine. Nearly killed him. I've never Chouza-sensei so mad before." Obito took a deep breath, channeling chakra clumsily through his whole body and hoping some of it fed through Kakashi's spine.

"Hyuuga got sent back to the village with a massive red flag on his file. Pretty sure he was banned from ever serving on the front lines again after that. Good riddance." Obito's lip curled with distaste. "I hope that fucker *died* in the Kyuubi attack."

The Kyuubi's chakra was a seething mass of flame and scorching wind so dense it was *physical*. Most shinobi who didn't die *immediately* upon engaging the Kyuubi during the Kyuubi Attack died from the aftereffects of exposure to its chakra.

Now, most human chakra wasn't physical. It had to be filtered into an element before it could take physical form. That was why genjutsu and henge weren't physical—they were pure yin chakra, no elements added.

Technically an affinity was just an inborn ability to convert yin and/or yang chakra into a particular element safely while it was still inside the human body.

It wasn't like the chakra that flowed through people's coils always existed in that elemental form—if it did, their health would take a major dip. Elemental chakra was great and all when it was being projected out of the body, but when left inside?

No.

There was a reason why nature chakra was deadly to humans. Unlike human chakra, nature chakra *existed* in elemental form; it didn't require a conscious transformation to convert it. That was why it was called *nature* chakra.

When elemental chakra was left to run amok inside the human body, it fucked shit up. Too much lightning chakra? The nerves were blown, ensuring that basic functions, like eating, blinking, and even breathing became impossible.

Too much water chakra? The blood vessels were overfilled with water, and the increased pressure would cause them to rupture. Ruptured blood vessels led to mass internal bleeding, led to death.

Too much earth chakra? The blood began to solidify and the internal organs started calcifying, hence why rumors said inept Sages petrified themselves while absorbing nature chakra.

The “survivors” of the Kyuubi Attack, the ones who were exposed to its chakra, discovered for themselves what happened when elemental chakra was left inside the human body.

The Kyuubi’s chakra had saturated the air around it with fire and wind chakra, and frankly, if it had had an ounce less control over the chakra that made it up, the chakra-infused air would have spread to the rest of Konoha instead of being trapped mainly around the battlefield.

The combatants who had inhaled that chakra-infused air had suffered from the Scorching—superheated air that quite literally cooked their lungs.

Needless to say, it was an *excruciatingly* painful way to die.

Kakashi’s head rolled limply against Obito’s shoulder, forehead coming to rest along Obito’s jaw.

Obito paused for a moment, shaken from his thoughts, and blinked down at Kakashi. He took in the slack expression on his face, then huffed. “You know, it just occurred to me that this is the first time I’ve ever seen your bare face. I mean, I guess I’ve seen Sukea’s face, but that’s different somehow. That was—that was *Sukea*. Not you. I mean, technically it *was* you but—*ugh*, you know what I mean.”

Obito lifted a hand from Kakashi’s tenketsu, scrubbed it through his hair, realized what he just did, and hastily slapped it back down again.

“All that time spent trying to catch you with your mask off,” Obito grumbled, “and when I do finally see you unmasked, I go days without realizing it. *Ugh*. I can’t believe you sometimes. You ruin all the fun.”

He closed his eye for a moment, forcibly dragging his thoughts away from Kakashi's face.

Then a thought struck him, and he turned to glare down at Kakashi. "Oh, you fucker," he seethed. "*That's* why you kept curling up on the side of the bed! You're used to your dogs shoving you around! And you kept shoving the left side of your face in the pillow—your left eye, fuck, you were trying to shut out the Sharingan's chakra drain, weren't you? And—"

Obito thought, suddenly, of that morning. Of his near heart attack when Sukea began humming a song Obito hadn't heard since before Kannabi. "—and that's why you knew Kushina's favorite Uzushio ballad. You used to hear it too! And all that tea you weren't drinking—you *hate* floral teas!"

Obito rolled one shoulder in lieu of waving a hand as he thought out loud. "And there was that dog in the field you kept cooing over. Of course, you would coo over it, you love dogs. You love dogs so much you went and got a whole pack of them, you weirdo."

He scowled at Kakashi, before saying pointedly, "You know, most people would have *one* summon they're most attached to, instead of a whole *pack* of them. Minato-sensei usually only used Gamakichi, much like how the Toad Sage mostly uses Gamabunta."

He pinched Kakashi. "But no, you had to go and be a dog-loving *overachiever*, with your eight—*eight*, I can't believe it, *eight*—favorite summons."

But there was no point in scolding Kakashi for that when he wasn't awake to appreciate it.

Obito's scowl faded. He looked again at Kakashi's sleep-slack face.

...It was still cute.

"I," he informed him grumpily, "cannot *believe* that I've thought you sleeping was cute twice. How dare you. I never wanted to have thoughts like that about *you* of all people."

Why would he? Thoughts like that, the way Obito meant them now, verged on crush territory and for most of their time together, Kakashi had been sufficiently young enough that it would've been creepy to think him cute.

There was a *four year age gap* between them.

Finding itty bitty, five-year-old Kakashi—who slept curled up like he was hugging an imaginary plush—adorable was one thing. That was cute-kid kind of cute. It was a whole different bushel of berries for an adult to think crush-cute about a kid.

Even eleven-year-old Rin cooing over seven-year-old Kakashi had necessitated a quick conversation with Minato-sensei about appropriate behavior.

It had been a wholly unnecessary conversation, of course.

They had all known that Rin—kind, sweet, gentle Rin—might think Kakashi was cool but she would *never* do anything to him. It had been made clear to *all* of them that that crush would not be going anywhere for another ten years at the bare *minimum* because of his age.

That conversation was part of why Obito had never really thought of Kakashi like *that*. After all, the last time Obito and Kakashi had really interacted had been at Kannabi, when they were sixteen and twelve years old respectively. And sixteen and twelve weren't much better than eleven and seven.

Sixteen and twelve meant that hormones were coming into play, and *nobody* needed to be having dirty thoughts about a barely-pubescent kid, jounin or not.

Even years later, Obito had kept Kakashi in a little box in his head labelled “off limits.” He'd never once considered Kakashi as a potential romantic prospect, and probably would never have if he hadn't met Sukea.

Sukea was sweet and gentle and cheerful and perfect in every way. He was like an adult, male, civilian reflection of Rin, and Obito had *adored* him for it.

Obito hadn't *looked* at anyone since Rin died. It felt like betraying her memory.

But looking at Sukea hadn't felt like betraying her memory. It felt like living up to it.

Or—perhaps that wasn't the right way to phrase that.

It was just that, as much as Obito loved Rin, his love for her began to

feel stranger and stranger as he got older.

Rin had died at age seventeen, and had been dead for almost eight years now. Obito had just turned twenty-five.

Sixteen-year-olds shouldn't have crushes on twelve-year-olds. Twenty-five-year-olds shouldn't have crushes on seventeen-year-olds either, even if they'd only been born a few months apart.

Sukea, though.

Sukea was like an older, male version of Rin, without all the sharp edges shinobi life instilled. Crushing on Sukea felt safe—like loving what Rin *could* be, if only she'd gotten the chance to grow up into a wonderful civilian woman far, far away from the horrors of shinobi life.

Except Sukea wasn't a civilian. Sukea was *Kakashi* in disguise.

Which meant that the pretty boy Obito had been falling a little bit in love with was the one person who was *firmly* off limits.

Obito shut his eye and *groaned*, and refused to even *acknowledge* the frustration in the sound.

His mind unhelpfully provided him with the memory of Sukea leaning in, palm pressed against his pecs. Of Sukea deliberately making eye contact as he dragged his hand down, low and slow, feeling him up without trying to hide it.

Obito tipped his head back, trying to drown out the memory of Sukea saying, so very sweetly, "I don't know, Tobi. I quite like what I'm feeling."

It was a good thing Obito didn't sleep, because that was going to live in his *dreams*.

He tried to tell himself that Kakashi had just been doing that to check his muscle-to-fat ratio. That Kakashi had just done that to see if Obito's muscles were the barely-there result of a civilian workout, or the kind of well-defined that could only come from years of shinobi-grade training. He tried to tell himself that Kakashi had only felt him up to check for any hidden weapons pouches, for any tell-tale signs that he was about to encounter enemy resistance so close to his massacre attempt.

He tried to tell himself that the whole thing was a purely mercenary exchange, and the flirtatious remark was just a front to distract from his true intentions.

Kakashi might not be a rules-obsessed twelve-year-old anymore, but he was still the epitome of a true shinobi.

There was no way that he hadn't learned by now how to flirt and how to use his target's reactions to the most devastating effect possible.

Obito ground his teeth and tried to ignore the magma-crawl of fury that surged at the thought of someone *teaching* Kakashi how to do those things.

He failed.

The only saving grace Obito had was that, up until relatively recently, Kakashi would have been too young to teach and too young to put it into practice.

(Thinking this, Obito deliberately ignored the nagging thought that being too young to volunteer for honeypot missions didn't exactly stop Kakashi from being able to hit on people, nor did it stop him from getting laid.)

Down that path lay madness, and Obito's kind of madness tended to result in messy massacres and the orchestration of global war.

As satisfying as it would be, Obito couldn't yet afford to stage a one-man war against Konoha.

He'd played *that* hand seven years ago, and lost, and now he had to extract the Kyuubi from its jinchuuriki as a penalty.)

*Not* that that mattered, of course.

Kakashi was still off limits, after all.

Even if he was older, he was off limits. Even if he'd *sounded* sincere when he'd hit on Obito, he was off limits. Even if Obito had *thought*—

Thought that it was better to fall in love with Sukea, because Sukea was alive to reciprocate. Because Sukea *did* reciprocate. Because Sukea, unlike Rin, wasn't a child *too young* for Obito to *want*. Because *Sukea* was old enough to be a consenting adult.

But Sukea was still Kakashi, and Kakashi was off limits.



...Not, of course, that Obito wanted Kakashi like *that*.

Obito's eye snapped open and he looked at Kakashi, suddenly guilty.

The phrase "consenting adult" implied an attraction that he *did not feel* for his younger teammate.

*Definitely.*

There was *no way at all* he'd want Kakashi as anything more than a teammate, and especially not in any... *sexual* way.

Obito felt a shudder go up his spine at the mere thought, and glanced around nervously. He couldn't help but think that Minato-sensei was glaring doom at him from the Pure Land.

*No, Obito told himself, it's definitely not sexual attraction I'm feeling. It's purely romantic. Misplaced love. I'm just transferring my crush on Rin onto the teammate who's actually legal to fuck and who can act like her. There is absolutely no way that I want to **sleep** with Kakashi.*

Feeling marginally more assured, Obito glanced down at Kakashi. He *intended* to do so to prove a point to himself—that when he looked at his teammate, there were no butterflies in his belly—but his gaze strayed a *little* further down.

He hadn't really registered it earlier, in the haze of terror caused by Kakashi's near death, but Kakashi's abdominal muscles were, ah... very well-defined.

Obito's gaze caught for a long moment on Kakashi's unfairly pretty pecs topped by pretty, peaky nipples. Then it slowly dropped, and Obito barely heard himself *whimper* as he got an eyeful of the washboard abs directly underneath.

*Oh fuck*, he thought, and it felt like a revelation. *Oh **fuck**, he's hot.*

Minato-sensei was *definitely* going to kill him for having horny thoughts.

## Chapter End Notes

This was partially inspired by some *incredible* shirtless Kakashi art on tumblr. I'd tag the artist, but I can't for the life of me find it again.

Also, I just want you guys to know that my outline for this

chapter basically consisted of this internal monologue:

Obito: It's better to have a crush on Kakashi when he's dressed as Rin than on Rin herself--I'm an adult almost ten years older than she was when she died and Kakashi, at least, is a consenting adult. It's less creepy this way, right? Right?

Obito: ...wait.

Obito: Wait. Shit. No. That came out wrong.

Obito: I didn't mean it like that! I'm not--it's just a crush! Pure romantic attraction! Misplaced love! I don't *actually* want to fuck Kakashi! I--

\*takes a peek down Kakashi's front\*

\*ogles Kakashi's bare pecs and abs\*

\*audibly whimpers\*

Obito: oh fuck he's hot

## End Notes

For those of you who skipped the middle section, to summarize: the noble Obito keeps talking about bought himself an underage "concubine." Obito, since he's still a morally compromised villain, plans to use this information to start a war instead of trying to save the girl.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!